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POWER AND PARTICIPATION IN A GENERAL UNION:  
PATTERNS OF ORGANISATION AND DEMOCRACY  
IN THREE GMB REGIONS

BY

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## SUMMARY

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This study is about the organisation and government of the General Municipal and Boilermakers' from 1970 to 1985. Its focus is, as far as is known, unique in that it concentrates primarily on government at the regional level, examining the GMB's Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions. Rather than focusing explicitly on the policy issues related to recent legislation, it analyses the wider issues of power and participation relevant to the debate on union democracy.

The thesis adopts an eclectic approach to union democracy, synthesising previous approaches within the framework of the vertical and horizontal dispersion of decision making developed by Undy et al, which is given a prescriptive dimension. The regional focus, and secondary focuses on intervening variables within the framework, are principally examined through conducting structured interviews with members and officers at all levels of the union.

The research work is divided into four chapters, which follow chapters reviewing the literature and presenting the research focus, and giving an historical overview of the union up until the research period commences. The first examines the national level changes since 1970 and membership participation in the national political system. The other three chapters have a specific regional focus analysing regional variations in membership growth and participation at the local level; the locus of regional power and variations in participation in regional government; and membership participation in collective bargaining.

The research contributes to knowledge of trade union government at the regional level; an almost completely explored and, it is argued, an important area which requires further research. It demonstrates the significant extent of regional variations within a single union and shows how these have led to markedly different levels of membership participation in decision making structures in the three regions. It shows that the commonly held view that GMB regional secretaries are barons of their own area is misplaced, noting constraints which prevent oligarchic domination of regions. It also highlights the pervasive, but long since neglected, influence of union constitutional provisions as a factor affecting union democracy. Finally, it suggests that the eclectic framework could be usefully adopted by future contributions to union democracy research.

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## Dedication

To the memory of my father who inculcated in me the virtues  
of study from an early age.

### Acknowledgement

I would like to take this opportunity to record my gratitude to all those who have helped in making this study. In particular I would like to thank the regional secretaries of the Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions, Geoff Wheatley, John Whelan and Tom Burlison, for allowing me full access to their members, officers and union records. In addition, I would like to thank the regional and district officers, and the branch officers, shop stewards and "rank and file" members who freely gave up their time to talk to me about their union. Finally, I should like to thank David Winchester for his comments, advice and encouragement throughout.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF DEMOCRACY IN TRADE UNIONS

2-

"In the case of a word like democracy not only is there no agreed definition but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides ... The defenders of any kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to one meaning."

George Orwell<sup>1</sup>

This study is about the organisation and government of the General Municipal and Boilermakers' from 1970 to 1985. Its focus is specifically on organisation and government at the regional level which is, as far as is known, unique. It also, however, seeks to analyse membership participation at national and local level, offering an overall picture of democratic practice in the GMB and addressing the wider issues of power and participation in the union democracy literature.

The issue of the democratic control of trade unions has been a perennial focus of study and debate in industrial relations. It has also become increasingly important as a political policy issue in Britain during the 1980s. The Conservative Government's 1984 Trade Union Act, like its precursor the 1980 Employment Act, was bitterly opposed by trade unions. It has imposed statutory requirements on trade unions to hold regular ballots for their principal executive body; ballots before strikes; and a ballot every ten years on

whether members wish their union to have a political fund. As Undy and Martin have argued,<sup>2</sup> it is not inevitable that the wider use of postal ballots will produce the "moderate" leaders that the Government imagine, and it is by no means certain that these measures will enhance democracy. The purpose of this research, however, is not to focus explicitly on ballots and immediate policy issues, but to examine the deeper issues relevant to the ballot debate.

The Government's White paper which preceeded the 1984 Act carefully avoided defining "Democracy in Trade Unions."<sup>3</sup> In this, it shared the fault, common in much of the literature on union government, of lacking a rigorous theoretical foundation on which to base its analysis. Although, as Orwell noted, there is no agreed definition of democracy, trying to evade the issue, or conveniently forget about it, is no answer.

Notions of political democracy are invariably seen as being desirable, the sine qua non of a civilised society, but their applicability to trade unions has been questioned. Writing in the 1950s Allen argued that:

"trade union organisation is not based on theoretical concepts prior to it, that is on some concept of democracy, but on the end it serves. In other words, the end of trade union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide an exercise in self-government."<sup>4</sup>

He has been unfairly pilloried for this view which he has long since retracted.<sup>5</sup> If critics had read his work at all



closely they would have found that it was explicitly predicated on the belief that trade unions were voluntary societies and could maintain their members only if they satisfied them.<sup>6</sup> At that time, before the massive growth of the closed shop, this was not an unreasonable view to hold. Allen, however, was also aware of the problem of unions becoming, in effect, compulsory societies arguing that "in such cases it is important that union constitutions should be democratic and that they should be used effectively by rank-and-file members."<sup>7</sup>

There are other reasons why democracy is important in trade unions<sup>8</sup> apart from the special demands of the closed shop and the prevailing attitudes and values of Western society. The representative character of a union affects its conviction in collective bargaining: members are more likely to identify with decisions they have participated in making; and managers are more likely to believe that union negotiators represent the genuine interests of their members. Democracy also makes union discipline more easily acceptable, enabling unions to be more effective as organisations. This study proceeds, therefore, in the belief that democracy should be a hallmark of trade union government.

### Democratic theory

Discussion of union democracy has relied heavily on the importation of terms borrowed from political theory. It is

important in that it has provided the context of the debate, but, in itself, it does not say anything about the operation and democratic practices of trade unions. These two elements of democracy need to be clearly separated. Democracy has both a descriptive function and a normative, persuasive function. Put another way it is necessary to distinguish between democracy as it actually is and democracy as it should be; the democratic reality from the democratic ideal."

Democracy comes from the Greek and the literal meaning of the word is "power of the people." This is merely a translation and it is obvious that democracy stands for something over and above the literal meaning of the word. There is no accepted view in political theory, however, as to what this constitutes. The most influential figure in modern debate has been Schumpeter who has argued that democracy is a political method, not an end in itself. "There are ultimate ideals and interests which the most ardent democrat will put above democracy;"<sup>10</sup> we would not approve of a democratic constitution that produced the persecution of Christians, the burning of witches and the slaughtering of Jews, in preference to a non-democratic one that avoided them. Moreover, since individuals are members of an unworkable committee, the committee of the whole nation, the role of the people is to produce a government - deciding issues is secondary to the election of the people who are to do the deciding. This view leads Schumpeter to offer the following definition:

"the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."<sup>11</sup>

This view, as Nicholson et al note,<sup>12</sup> has been challenged by Williams and Pateman, for its normative implications in setting the Anglo-American political system as the democratic ideal. The former has eloquently demonstrated that the concept of democracy has had very different meanings at different times and in different societies, with the modern view of representative or parliamentary democracy only emerging in the 17th century.<sup>13</sup>

Pateman has located this modern view of democracy more specifically within established philosophical debate. The 17th century philosophers Locke and Berkeley, and later, Hume in the 18th century, had argued that people were either unable or unwilling to exercise active control over the processes of government, and that, consequently, the defining feature of democracy should be the right for people to choose at regular intervals the people who would represent them in government. In contrast, however, Rousseau and Mill represented a different tradition which stressed the importance of direct participation in decision-making, arguing that it has a central "educative" function, ensuring that people are "forced to be free." Pateman advocates this latter theory and finds evidence to conclude that we "learn to participate by participating,"<sup>14</sup> but this is illustrated



by secondary source data of industrial democracy - the John Lewis partnership, Scott Bader Commonwealth, and Yugoslavian workers' self-management - rather than examination of union government.

What is important to grasp from this analysis is that there are two different political theories of democracy: representative democracy, and participatory democracy. Each has separate intellectual antecedents: Locke, Berkeley and Hume, in the case of representative democracy, which will be termed parliamentary democracy from now on; Rousseau and Mill in the case of participatory democracy. Each has modern theoretical protagonists: Schumpeter, Dahl and Sartori in the first case; and Pateman and Williams in the latter.

This intellectual schism is reflected in the literature on trade union democracy. Most approaches to the study of the subject can be usefully categorised within either tradition and it has produced two distinctly separate research focuses. Studies in the parliamentary mould have concentrated on internal union government; those embracing the participatory ethos have focused almost exclusively on the workplace. While, there may be no need for an intellectual rapprochement within political theory, however, there is clearly a need for an eclectic view of democracy as it applies to trade unions. Trade unions are essentially organisations of a different kind to nation states and political systems and have different democratic

requirements. Union democracy must involve both members participating directly in decision-making and, where necessary, indirectly through the election of representatives.

This chapter examines the different approaches to trade union democracy within these separate traditions before examining two attempts that have been made to combine these views.<sup>15</sup> It then offers a synthetic view and, in the research focus, highlights gaps in the existing literature which will be addressed in the subsequent research.

#### The parliamentary tradition and union government

The logical starting point for any analysis of democracy as it applies to trade unions is Sidney and Beatrice Webb's pioneering work "Industrial Democracy." First published in 1898, it raised fundamental questions which are still of great relevance today. In tracing the origins of trade unionism the Webbs found that the early unions were governed through what they called "primitive democracy:" a general meeting of all members deciding issues affecting them. The growth of unions, however, soon made this impractical and "in passing from a local to a national organisation the trade union unwittingly left behind the ideal of primitive democracy."<sup>16</sup> In the modern trade union this system of government would lead "straight either to inefficiency and



disintegration, or to the uncontrolled dominance of a personal dictator or an expert bureaucracy."<sup>17</sup> The solution to "the fundamental problem of democracy, the combination of administrative efficiency and popular control" was to be found in the "frank acceptance of representative institutions."<sup>18</sup> The Webbs, therefore, enthusiastically endorsed the parliamentary approach, arguing that the more developed unions, such as the Cotton-Spinners' Association, showed the model for others:

"the association is a fully-equipped democratic state of the modern type. It has an elected parliament, exercising supreme and uncontrolled power. It has a cabinet appointed by and responsible only to that parliament. And its chief executive officer, appointed once for all on grounds of efficiency, enjoys the civil-service permanence of tenure."<sup>19</sup>

A completely different approach was adopted thirteen years later with the publication of Michels' highly influential work "Political Parties." In his view:

"It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy."<sup>20</sup>

Michels' argument, based on his experience in the German Socialist movement, was that there is a psychological and technical need for leadership within organisations. But leaders, by the very nature of their job, (as the Webbs recognised) become professional and acquire greater expertise and knowledge than members and potential rivals. They, therefore, use this position to maintain oligarchic control

as the organisation becomes identified with them.

This analysis convinced Michels that democracy was impossible and led him to admire Mussolini.<sup>21</sup> It has, however, been criticised within political theory not only for its pessimism,<sup>22</sup> but also its lack of rigorous analysis,<sup>23</sup> and more significantly, for its over-determinism.<sup>24</sup> Clegg has contentiously called Michels' analysis "the most popular academic theory of union government."<sup>25</sup> While it has certainly been a feature of some studies,<sup>26</sup> and it has even been suggested that union democracy is a "futile quest,"<sup>27</sup> the gravamen of many studies is that there are factors which preclude oligarchic control of unions.

Within the parliamentary approach to union democracy three separate approaches can be identified which suggest a modification of the oligarchy thesis. These are the existence of faction or party opposition; the closeness of electoral competition; and constitutional limitations on oligarchic domination. They will be examined in turn.

### Parties and factions

Modern interest in union government and the problem of defining democracy has largely centred around the challenge posed by Lipset, Trow and Coleman in their classic study of the International Typographical Union. The defining characteristic of democracy in their analysis is "the



institutionalisation of the two party system."<sup>28</sup> With the exception of the ITU, however, they confirm Michels' iron law concluding that:

"the structure of large scale organisations inherently requires the development of bureaucratic patterns of behaviour. The conditions making for the institutionalisation of bureaucracy and those making for democratic turnover in office are largely incompatible."<sup>29</sup>

At a conceptual level their argument can be challenged for its naive belief that oligarchy disappears when a formalised two-party system exists. No real reason is given to explain why organisation in parties or unions produces leadership oligarchy, but if any organisation has internal parties there is no oligarchy. At the very least, Lipset et al need to argue that each party is subject to oligarchic tendencies if their analysis is to be consistent. They also need to address their analysis to decentralised structures since Michels' argued that these "result merely in the creation of a number of smaller oligarchies, each of which is no less powerful in its own sphere."<sup>30</sup>

The idea that opposition is the main force limiting oligarchy has been taken up by others who have taken a less restrictionist approach. Wooton, for example, took the view that a party need not be institutionalised so long as it offered a clear-cut choice of decision-makers over a significant period.<sup>31</sup> Martin has argued that the survival of faction is sufficient to ensure democracy because "it limits the executive ability to disregard rank and file opinion by

providing the potential means for its overthrow."<sup>32</sup> This view has been supported empirically by Undy who has shown that the opposition in the Engineers did exercise some influence over electoral outcomes in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>33</sup> The factional approach has influenced other studies,<sup>34</sup> but it has been criticised by Dickenson who has argued that although factions and parties "may perform many similar functions they nevertheless can be distinguished in terms of their structure and behaviour."<sup>35</sup> Such a strict interpretation only leads to sterile debate, however, and, as Undy and Martin recognise, the relationship between faction and party is best viewed as a continuum with unstructured factions at one end and well-established parties at the other.<sup>36</sup>

The saliency of party or factional activity lies not only in providing opposition. It has the further important functions of encouraging membership participation and ensuring that members make informed decisions rather than random choices.<sup>37</sup> The approach is limited, however, in that its focus has invariably been at the national level. Its relevance to individual unions, therefore, depends very much on the degree to which significant decisions are taken at that level and research has shown that this varies widely among unions.<sup>38</sup>

#### The closeness of electoral competition

Another approach within the parliamentary tradition has



posited the closeness of electoral competition as the touchstone of democracy. In doing so it directly translates Schumpeter's competitive struggle for the people's vote into union terms. The model, developed by Edelstein and Warner and examined in a study of 31 British and 51 American unions,<sup>39</sup> is related to the debate on opposition noted above since it is concerned with the effectiveness of opposition. Its "organisational theory of union democracy" also stresses constitutional factors and is, therefore, related to the approach that is noted below. The approach, however, is essentially different in that it has a purely electoralist conception of democracy, which, as Clegg has argued, "is not very suitable to British unions"<sup>40</sup> where the regularity of election of these posts varies widely.

The research, by focusing on "the average closeness of elections for top-post vacancies or ... to the percentage of elections reaching a given level of closeness,"<sup>41</sup> again is concerned only with the national level. Its concept of union democracy has been criticised<sup>42</sup> on a number of methodological grounds; and for its concentration on formal organisational factors, completely ignoring contextual variables.

Competitive elections can, at best, only be seen as indicative of democratic organisation; they are not proof of union democracy, which is dependent on more complex factors.

A similar failing is apparent in the other strand within this approach, the study of polyarchy. This term has been coined



by Dahl who has argued that "since ... no large system in the real world is fully democratized, I prefer to call real world systems polyarchies."<sup>43</sup> Its application in industrial relations, however, has led to essentially descriptive studies<sup>44</sup> of the democratic reality, which have focused largely on electoral processes, and added nothing to the discussion of union democracy.

#### Constitutional limitations on oligarchic domination

The final approach within the parliamentary model of union democracy is derived from the U.S. constitution rather than British political tradition. Cook argues that this system of government can be directly applied to trade unions, openly advocating the ideal of "a system of checks and balances between the functional branches of government,"<sup>45</sup> in which the formal separation of powers is central. Other American writers,<sup>46</sup> however, have been content to discuss the democratic reality, noting the absence of separation of powers and questioning "whether organised Labor is actually becoming a menace to freedom."<sup>47</sup>

In Britain the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers has been recognised as a feature of the AEU.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the importance of formal constitutional provisions has been emphasised in a number of studies, most notably by Roberts,<sup>49</sup> whose approach is less proselytising than Cook. Flanders has also argued that "the constitutional

checks on bureaucracy in the British trade unions are, however, relatively strong."<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the American influenced standpoints of Edelman and Warner, and Cook, most British studies have rightly realised that "a formally democratic constitution is only one of a number of possibly important factors in trade union democracy."<sup>51</sup>

The importance of the formal separation of powers in union government, however, has tended to be downgraded by the workplace orientation of much of industrial relations research in the post-Donovan era. This stresses the importance of decentralisation in union decision making and the approach, in its most extreme manifestation implies that internal union government is irrelevant, since the level of bargaining is the "key" to democracy.<sup>52</sup> This approach is not only one-dimensional, ignoring non-bargaining issues; it also assumes that control flows uniquely and unproblematically from members to stewards; and there is strong evidence to show that this is not the case.<sup>53</sup>

This shift in emphasis is unfortunate since union constitutions have become more relevant to the democratic debate over the last decade. There are two reasons for this. First, they provide the structure for determining proposals to change a union's organisation in response to changes in bargaining structures; different constitutions can either facilitate or block administrative change.<sup>54</sup> Second, non-bargaining issues have become increasingly important as

trade unions seek to redefine their role in recession and in the more hostile climate of the 1980s. The "decline of the big battalions"<sup>55</sup> is requiring unions to take key decisions on organisational change, which have implications for membership servicing but cannot essentially be described as bargaining issues. It is also increasingly leading unions to seek legal and political solutions to industrial problems. A reassessment of the importance of union rule books, therefore, is long overdue.

### Participation and union democracy

Approaches to the study of democracy in trade unions which focus on participation have done so from a number of different perspectives. For instance, studies have used the findings that few members actually participate to justify Michels' iron law,<sup>56</sup> or to suggest that research should neglect rank and file members and focus on the "active minority."<sup>57</sup> In addition, Cook has cited the unrepresentativeness of this minority as a reason for unions requiring constitutional checks and balances.<sup>58</sup> These contributions, however, are easily distinguishable from studies located within the participatory tradition.

Participatory analyses, more than studies in the parliamentary tradition, have been conducted from a number of different social science standpoints; they have, however,



often lacked a coherent theoretical framework. Many have been content simply to list factors influencing membership activism,<sup>39</sup> without defining participation, or recognising that the degree of membership involvement and membership motivations can vary widely.<sup>40</sup> Where attempts have been made to adopt theoretical models these have tended to be imported from organisational theory and offer views on membership involvement not union democracy.<sup>41</sup> Despite definitional inadequacies and lack of theoretical precision, however, these analyses share the common attitude that study of union constitutions and institutions alone is inadequate; as Ramaswamy has noted "without participation these forms will be mere empty shells."<sup>42</sup>

The variety of approaches in participatory literature make it less amenable to categorisation than parliamentary approaches, nevertheless, three main focuses can be identified. These are socialist democracy; participation in job control; and participation at the local level. Their significance to union democracy will now be assessed.

### Socialist democracy

Orwell's remark that the defenders of any kind of regime claim it is a democracy is particularly pertinent to the self-labelled "people's democracies" of the eastern block countries. The difference between the democratic reality of these political systems and the democratic ideal is, in

marxist terms, the difference between socialism and communism.

2.

Marxist political theory is clear on the role of democracy. Lenin in his analysis of capitalism in "The State and Revolution" argued that:

"Democracy is a state which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority , ie, an organisation for the systematic use of force by one class against another, by one section of the population against another."<sup>43</sup>

This view closely followed that developed by Marx in his analysis of the Paris Commune where he attacked parliamentary or "capitalist democracy:"

"the oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class shall represent and repress them in parliament."<sup>44</sup>

For Marx and Lenin revolution replaced democracy for the rich with democracy for the poor: the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was socialist democracy; a higher democracy than capitalist democracy. It was only temporary, as Lenin reminded, in moving from socialism to communism:

"it is constantly forgotten that the abolition of the state means also the abolition of democracy: that the withering away of the state means the withering away of democracy."<sup>45</sup>

In essence, therefore, there is no democratic ideal from communist analysis which can be applied to the study of trade unions; the ideal is a society where there is no democracy.



Socialist democracy, however, is an intermediate step; the party programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sets its aim as the:

"extension and perfection of socialist democracy, the active participation of all citizens in the administration of the state..."<sup>46</sup>

A similar strand of reasoning within this approach, but encompassing a different, more libertarian, concept of socialism, is Fairbrother's argument that "union democracy is about membership participation and involvement, even at the highest level."<sup>47</sup> Openly propagandist, its contention that "union democracy represents both the embodiment of socialist practice and the prospect that socialism can be achieved"<sup>48</sup> is, however, based more on assertion than on reasoned argument. It also contains a number of naive assumptions about workplace-based branch representational structures, the role of full-time officers, and the influence of national conferences which cannot sustain the argument that is generated from them.

### Participation in job control

A closely related approach to socialist democracy has been to define the ideal type of union democracy in terms of membership "job control."<sup>49</sup> Hyman succinctly expresses this view of democracy:

"its traditional meaning is clear: popular power, the

active involvement in decision-making of the ordinary members of a community or institution or organisation."<sup>70</sup>

As a marxist, however, Hyman<sup>4</sup> offers the following definition of power:

"the ability of an individual or group to control his (their) physical and social environment; and, as part of this process, the ability to influence the decisions which are and are not taken by others."<sup>71</sup>

In defining power in terms of control, industrial and union democracy are fused as concepts; union democracy can only be effectively achieved through the hegemonic control of the workplace, by the rank and file.

This type of approach was carefully avoided by Pateman, who, nevertheless, pointed out the beneficial effects of membership participation in decision-making in industry.<sup>72</sup> It cannot be accepted as a satisfactory description of union democracy. It is neither useful nor desirable to define the democratic ideal of trade union organisation in terms which necessitate the overthrow of capitalism. Trade unions were not formed with this purpose in mind and have not, thus far, shown any indication of being converted to such a view.

#### Participation at the local level

The final approach that can be identified within the participatory tradition, local level participation, has typically had two separate focuses, the branch and the

workplace. The branch focus has tended to produce descriptive empirical studies rather than prescriptive democratic theorising.<sup>73</sup> The significant exception to this is Nicholson et al's social psychological study of a large NALGO branch in Sheffield. This usefully applies two borrowed concepts: Seidman et al's insight that the essential factor of democracy "is the ability of the rank and file to affect decisions, replace leaders, and to change policies;"<sup>74</sup> and Child et al's model of union activity, which distinguishes between administrative and representative rationality.<sup>75</sup> Nicholson et al incorporate into the latter the concept of negative control: control via non-participation. The study found that the role of the representative, the steward, as:

"crucial to explaining some degree of individual membership participation and also as contributing substantially to the political processes of the organization, via informal factionalism and formal competition over outcomes."<sup>76</sup>

This view is predicated, however, on regular and easy access between stewards and members, the existence of which has been shown to be empirically variable.<sup>77</sup> While Nicholson et al usefully confirm the importance of factionalism and also, following Martin,<sup>78</sup> stress "educational levels and background political socialization factors"<sup>79</sup> in developing an individuals capacity to participate, it appears that the link between stewards and participation is not as clear or as simple as they suggest.



This is also a problem in the other strand of analysis within this approach which, following the empirical observations of limited branch participation in the 1950s, focused on the workplace in the 1960s and 1970s. Workplace organisation has been cited as being more fundamental to union democracy than formal democratic structures and the main force limiting oligarchic control.<sup>80</sup> It has also been identified by Kahn Freund as approaching direct democracy.<sup>81</sup>

These views have largely been derived from studies located in the private manufacturing sector, especially engineering, and were essentially based on a model, implicitly noted by Donovan, of shop stewards acting as work group representatives, independent from the official trade union movement, and engaging in wage bargaining with employers. This focus was highly relevant to the national concern with the problems of manufacturing and wage drift in the 1960s, and the need to sustain effective wage policies in the private sector for most of the 1970s. This latter concern led to some of the assumptions behind the model being questioned, with it being debated whether shop stewards were being incorporated into trade union government to deliver workplace compliance to pay policies.<sup>82</sup> The model is of less relevance in the 1980s, however, and it is now more widely recognised that the findings from research conducted into shop steward organisation and activities in the manufacturing sector may not be exportable to other sectors.



The study of the workplace and the decentralisation of union decision making has made a significant contribution to the debate on union democracy.<sup>2</sup> It cannot, nevertheless, provide a complete analysis of union democracy. This has been realised by Clegg who has modified his provocative assertion that the level of bargaining is the key to democracy,<sup>83</sup> taking the more eclectic view that factional competition and workplace organisation have helped promote democracy but "do not by themselves constitute democracy. Democracy also rests on elections and individual rights."<sup>84</sup>

Both the microanalytical branch study and the workplace focus have strengths and weaknesses as approaches to union democracy. Their respective strengths lie in the insights gained into the dimensions of participation and in the prescription that important decisions should, as far as possible, be taken by members. They both, however, share the inevitable weakness of being silent about decisions that necessarily have to be taken at national and regional level. As such, therefore, they provide only a partial solution to the problem of defining union democracy.

#### Union democracy: an eclectic approach

There have been two noteworthy attempts to synthesise parliamentary and participatory approaches to union democracy. Firstly, Hemingway has argued that union government is best interpreted as a process of exerting

control. This leads him to postulate a conflict model which integrates control through participation, control through opposition (the parliamentary approach), along with control through satisfaction.<sup>85</sup> The process involved is that:

"when issues arise over which leaders and members disagree, the parties must strategically deploy resources to secure compliance of the opposition, and the outcome of their conflict will demonstrate the balance of control."<sup>86</sup>

Hemingway's model is flawed, however, in that it unrealistically assumes that looking at "who wins" in conflict situations is an adequate measure of democracy. It also seems simplistic to assert that conflict is the obverse of control, other factors may be at work. Furthermore, no attempt is made to assess the scale of conflict; and there is no analytical framework in the model for discussing the importance of non-decisions<sup>87</sup> or negative control<sup>88</sup> as factors influencing union democracy.

Second, Undy et al, in their study of change in trade unions, made three useful distinctions: between union governmental channels used for bargaining and non-bargaining issues; between the de jure legal position in union constitutions and the de facto position in practice; and, most importantly, between the vertical and horizontal dispersion of decision-making.

"Two related forms of dispersal are distinguished. One concerns the extent to which decisions are decentralized downwards from the national level, that is, the degree of vertical dispersal; the other relates to the extent to which decisions are concentrated or



diffused across a given level of union government - for example, national, regional or local level. This form of dispersal we term 'horizontal dispersal.'<sup>87</sup>

This provides a highly useful analytical tool for examining trade union government since it embodies both participatory and parliamentary approaches and, unlike most of these approaches, it is not confined to analysis of one particular level of government, but encompasses different levels. As it stands, however, this approach is merely descriptive, offering no view of the democratic ideal. A prescriptive interpretation is hinted at by Undy and Martin who review decentralisation of decision-making as one of a number of democratic models and comment: "according to this model, the lower the level of decision making, the more democratic the union."<sup>90</sup>

This prescription is, nevertheless, inadequate within its own terms as it ignores the horizontal dispersion of decision-making. Can a union in which five people take a decision at local level be more democratic than another union where five hundred people take the same decision at regional level? It is also inadequate in that the level of participation may not be important; the democratic ethos of union leaders<sup>91</sup> and the "compulsive pressures"<sup>92</sup> for democracy do not guarantee informed participation. The following qualification is therefore suggested: the lower the level of decision making and the wider the level of participation (and the more informed the participants) at any given level, the more democratic the union.



The eclectic approach to union democracy which will form the research focus and framework can thus now be identified. This approach recognises that parliamentary and participatory approaches are complementary not alternatives. It synthesises these approaches within the framework of examining the vertical and horizontal dispersion of decision making at national, regional and local level. Constitutional checks and balances, factions, and elections are all seen as important intervening variables affecting the horizontal dispersion of participation within these levels. Attached to this descriptive framework is the prescriptive belief that the lower the level of decision making and the wider the level of participation (and the more informed the participants) at any given level, the closer a union comes to the democratic ideal.

In positing an ideal type of union democracy, it should be emphasised that it is a hypothetical construct for analytical purposes and one would never expect to find this in its pure form in real life. Moreover, unlike nation states, trade unions are intermediary organisations and some unions are inevitably more centralised than others because of the fact that they have to bargain nationally. It would be unfair to call these unions less democratic. In such circumstances, however, the prescription that decision making at that level should be informed and dispersed is still applicable and the representative structures of parliamentary approaches need

to be rigidly enforced. It is, nevertheless, an important caveat to realise that the level that decisions are taken at can be determined externally.

### Research Design

Designing research on union democracy immediately presents a problem in seeking to define new avenues for research. During this century there have arguably been more studies on union democracy than any other single subject in industrial relations. This problem is easily confronted at the level of theory since many of these studies have either made no attempt to define union democracy, or have inadequately specified it in parliamentary or participatory terms alone. It is less easily solved, however, as the eclectic approach developed is more of a gloss than a substantial modification of Undy et al's approach to the study of change in trade unions. While a valuable contribution to the literature could be made by updating this work, the research input this would require is well beyond the scope of a Ph.D. thesis.

A more manageable proposition is to focus research within the eclectic approach itself, examining some of its characteristics in greater detail. The deficiencies that have been noted in the literature suggest one major focus and three second order focuses can be identified.

## Research focus

The intellectual schism in the literature on union democracy, while provoking fierce debate and voluminous research, has tended to focus this research on opposite ends of union government. Parliamentary approaches have invariably concentrated on the national level and neglected regional and local decision-making structures. On the other hand participatory approaches have tended to focus almost exclusively on the local level, ignoring regional and national dimensions. Consequently, while there have been a large number of studies at national and local level, there has been, as far as is known, no previous attempt to focus research at a regional level. This is a surprising omission, not least because of the evidence of considerable regional variations in trade union practice, and the diversity of union constitutional provisions for "sub-central" government in areas, districts, regions, etc.

This thesis, therefore, in choosing to focus primarily on the regional level, attempts to contribute to understanding the nature and significance of membership participation at this level, and assessing the importance of regional decision making to union democracy. It is hoped that it will stimulate further research in this unexplored area.

This focus relates to one of the major themes in the literature; oligarchy, and its attenuating factors. This has



also only been applied at national level, or at a local level in incorporationist views, despite Michels' contention that the "iron law" applied equally at other organisational levels.

Three other second order themes emerge from the literature. Firstly, the importance of constitutional provisions in facilitating or preventing change. These are becoming increasingly significant as unions seek to re-define their roles and change their organisational structures in response to the changed circumstances of the 1980s. The study of rule book provisions has, however, largely been ignored as a research area in the post-Donovan era.<sup>93</sup>

Second, the importance of variations in branch structure to membership participation. Local level studies have either tended to adopt poor descriptive taxonomies or focus on participation in a single branch. There have been few, if any, attempts to seriously relate branch structure to participation and to examine the implications of this for decision making and elections to higher bodies.

Third, the importance of the absence of factionalism to union democracy. Factionalism has been cited as a characteristic of union democracy and the eclectic approach developed also includes it as an important intervening variable. A number of studies have focused on unions with established party or factional activity and suggested that they are democratic;

the obverse focus, however, has not been examined. It is relevant to consider the implications for membership participation of situations where factionalism is absent and to examine whether factionalism and oligarchy are necessarily opposite sides of the same coin.

#### The research setting: a large general union

There are two possible choices of research setting for a regional analysis: an inter-union study, or a study of different regions within a single union. Although the former has merits, and potentially offers interesting insights into the level of importance different trade unions attach to their regional structures, the intra-union approach has been preferred. The benefit of this approach is that it enables the union rule book to be held constant. It also, to a large extent, avoids problems with variations in the industrial composition of union memberships.

The specific research setting, the General Municipal and Boilermakers, hereafter the GMB, immediately suggested itself as a research focus as a result of contacts that had previously been developed in the union. From these contacts an interest developed in the democratic practices and regional disparities within the union. The opportunity to undertake a MA dissertation in the Birmingham region highlighted the importance of a focus on regional variations in the GMB. Although this was almost purely a descriptive

study of regional organisation, rather than analytical and comparative, it provided sufficient grounding for it to be used as the basis for a "pilot" study.

Apart from personal factors, the GMB naturally suggests itself as a focus for study since it is well-recognised as one of the most regionalised of Britain's trade unions. It has also often been remarked that the union's regional secretaries are "barons" in their own area, imputing a concept of regional oligarchy that has not been examined. Two other factors are also apposite. Firstly, it is recognised to be largely free from factional activity, enabling research to focus on the implications of this for union democracy. Second, unlike its great rival the TGWU, it has not been a primary research area for over thirty years.<sup>94</sup>

The research focus is concerned with the GMB over the period 1970-85, enabling study of the organisational changes and changes in union character that occurred during this time. While examining change at a national level, the focus is primarily on the extent to which changes that affect the regional and local levels require regional commitment for their effective implementation and demonstrate regional variations.

The GMB has ten regions and it has not been possible for all these to be examined in sufficient detail in a doctoral thesis. Research has, therefore focused on three regions.



The guiding assumption for choosing these has been that they reflect the organisational differences of the union. An indication of this is given by the percentage of the membership covered in different types of branch. Table 1.1 shows the regional variations.

Table 1.1

Membership coverage by type of branch

Region	Trade/Industry Branches %	General Branches %
Liverpool	86	14
Scottish	71	29
South West	55	45
Northern	48	52
Midland	47	53
Yorkshire	47	53
London	43	57
Birmingham	41	59
Southern	31	69
Lancashire	9	91

SOURCE: Executive Council Finance Steering Group Working Party on Branch and Workplace Administration.

The GMB also has significant regional differences in membership size, number of branches, and number and type of officers. These are illustrated in Table 1.2.

The selection of the Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions as the research setting was finally made following discussions with the GMB's head of research, where it was intimated that access would prove difficult in the Lancashire region, which was one of the intended areas of study.

Table 1.2

A regional comparison of membership, number of branches, and regional and district officer structure.

Region	Membership	Branches	RO's	DO's
Birmingham	89,000	222	18	10
Lancashire	93,000	141	15	17
Liverpool	76,000	362	28	13
London	97,000	249	18	10
Midland	72,000	280	11	7
Northern	109,000	293	26	7
Scottish	105,000	362	28	13
Southern	88,000	260	15	12
South West	49,000	270	10	9
Yorkshire	87,000	235	15	7

SOURCE: 1982 Congress Report.

The Scottish region, another of the potentially most interesting, was not considered as its geographical distance would make the detailed fieldwork required impractical. The sample, however, covers the GMB's largest and, reputedly, best organised region; the region with the most substantially different branch structure and a reputation for radical politics; and one the union's most centralised regions.

#### Research methods

This study is based on interviews with officers and members of the GMB, examination of union records at head office and the three regional offices, and attendance at union meetings and annual Congress.

The research was conducted principally by a series of structured interviews in the three regions. A total of seventy-six face to face interviews were carried out between September 1984 and March 1986. These interviews lasted from thirty minutes to over two and a half hours, with an average length of one hour. They also varied from being very rich to almost non-existent in content. The Birmingham region, as the closest, was used to develop research techniques and "pilot" the approach adopted in the other regions. Of the interviews, thirty-six were in Birmingham, the remainder split evenly between the other two regions. Consequently, the research data on some issues is richer in Birmingham than it is in the other regions.

In addition to regional secretaries, interviews were conducted with eight regional or district officers in the Liverpool and Northern regions and twelve in the Birmingham region. Interviews with lay members comprised eight lay activists and four ordinary lay members in both the Liverpool and Northern regions, and fifteen activists and nine ordinary members in Birmingham. Lay activists, in this sense, refers to members holding office; it, therefore, includes branch secretaries, branch chairs, shop stewards, regional council, regional committee and Executive Council members. Since a number of people interviewed held more than one of these offices it is not particularly meaningful to split this analysis further. The interviews did, however, provide a representative cross-section of offices held and were



supplemented by countless informal discussions with members and officers at all levels in the union.

2-

Research also involved examining Congress reports from 1968-85; reading regional council and committee minutes and financial statements; and a detailed review of the union's rules. Recent issues of the GMB's Journal, officers and shop stewards handbooks, and a number of other head office publications were also examined.

### Outline of thesis

The research focus and framework emerging from the eclectic approach is examined in five chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 both focus on the union at the national level and demonstrate the vertical concentration of power within the GMB at the regional level. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on the three regions studied, analysing membership participation at branch and regional level, and in collective bargaining.

Chapter 2 examines the union's history up to 1970. It relies primarily on secondary sources, particularly the works of Clegg, focusing on the importance of the union's constitutional arrangements in determining the significant organisational features of the union: regional power, the block vote system, the full-time lay activist, rule book restrictions on branches. It also outlines the distinctive themes in the GMB's character - nepotism, moderation and

loyalty to the Labour party, and business unionism - focusing on Basnett's inheritance when he became general secretary in 1974.

Chapter 3 examines membership participation in the union at a national level since Basnett took office. It focuses on the GMB's political system; the respective roles of Congress, the Executive Council and the general secretary, and the limited role of factionalism. It also examines the implications the organisational reforms and the changes in union character that occurred during the Basnett era have had on lay participation in decision making. Further, it illustrates how national reform initiatives require regional commitment and cooperation if they are to be effective, focusing on the implications this has for the power of the GMB's general secretary. It also focuses on the recent election of John Edmonds.

Chapter 4 examines membership distribution and participation at branch level in the three regions. It focuses on the discretion afforded by the autonomy the union's rules give to its regions; the impact that these rules have had on branch structure, particularly as a result of the operation of the commission system; and the importance of branch structure in encouraging or precluding participation. It also highlights the relevance of branch structure to regional elections, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 examines the scope and nature of regional power and its variations between the three regions. It focuses on the notion of regional oligarchy, examining the constraints on the power of regional secretaries. As part of this focus it analyses the distribution of power within regional structures. It also focuses on elections to regional councils and committees and to regional Congress delegations, examining the importance of factionalism and branch structure in these elections. Further, it discusses the importance of the union's rules in concentrating power at the regional level on non-bargaining issues.

Chapter 6 examines membership participation in decision making on bargaining issues. It has two related focuses. Firstly, it focuses on the implications for lay participation of the union's reform of its regional and local officer structure, and the extension and consolidation of its industrial conference structure. Second, it focuses on membership participation in two sectors, private manufacturing and local government, assessing the importance of branch structure, and offering a limited analysis of the representativeness of shop stewards and the scope for local bargaining in these sectors.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of the study and briefly summarises the main arguments which have been developed and concluded on at the end of each chapter. It aims to offer conclusions on the applicability of the eclectic research



framework that has been developed to examine union democracy and on the specific research focuses that have been identified. Arising from the primary research focus it seeks to emphasise the need for studies to examine the evidence of variations in the regional level of government in trade unions, and particularly it aims to conclude on the notion of regional oligarchy suggested by accounts noting the power of the GMB's regional barons. It also seeks to offer conclusions on the importance of the second order research focuses - constitutional provisions, factionalism, and branch structure - both to the GMB and to studies of democracy in trade unions in general.

GENERAL UNION

2-

Every large-scale, dynamic organisation develops formal and informal methods of working and structural patterns that are peculiar to it alone. Trade unions are no exception. They are "historical deposits and repositories of history ... every union has a personality of its own."<sup>1</sup> This makes attempts to categorise unions<sup>2</sup> of limited value. There is no neatness about British trade union organisation. As Cooper, one of the GMB's past general secretaries, told the Donovan commission "the free trade union is very much like Topsy, it has simply grown up and is an untidy structure."<sup>3</sup> This all means, therefore, that "there is no acceptable alternative to examining individual unions in turn"<sup>4</sup>

This chapter describes and analyses the fundamental and distinctive features of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers which have developed since its formative amalgamation in 1924 to around 1970, setting the context for the presentation and analysis of the research findings in subsequent chapters. It relies largely on secondary sources, particularly the works of the union's official historian, Hugh Clegg,<sup>5</sup> but also on selected interviews and a detailed analysis of the union's rulebook. Inevitably, attempts to provide such a contextual setting reflect an uneasy compromise between leaving too many questions unanswered and

providing too detailed an analysis. The preference in this chapter has been to keep information down to a necessary minimum and to omit detail, where it can be introduced at a later date.

On a stylistic note, the importance of the GMB's regions in its structure is a major theme of the chapter, but it was not until 1974 that the union's districts were re-named regions. For clarity, the term region has been used throughout.

### The two amalgamations

The General Municipal and Boilermakers' is Britain's second biggest union and has members in almost every industry and occupation. It was formed in September 1982 by the amalgamation of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (865,164 members) and the Amalgamated Society of Boilermakers, Shipwrights, Blacksmiths and Structural Workers (119,585 members). Both these constituent unions have had a long tradition of membership of the labour movement. The NUGMW itself was formed in 1924 by an amalgamation of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland, the National Amalgamated Union of Labour (founded in 1889 as the Tyneside and General Labourers' Union) and the Municipal Employees' Association (founded in 1894). The origins of the ASBSBSW can be traced back even further, starting as a society formed by boilermakers in 1834, but now covering a range of crafts, including welders,



platers, shipwrights, caulkers, burners, drillers, riveters, loftsmen, riggers, structural steelwork and flame-cutting workers.<sup>6</sup> This highly-skilled membership contrasted sharply with the membership of the NUGMW which was overwhelmingly unskilled and manual. In 1973, when Basnett was elected general secretary of the union, over 96% of GMB members were manual workers and nearly two thirds were concentrated in four main sectors: engineering and shipbuilding; food, drink and tobacco; public utilities; and local government. There was also a substantial membership in chemicals, bricks, glass, construction, rubber manufacturing, textiles, clothing, the National Health Service, hotels and catering, distributive trades and other services.<sup>7</sup>

It was certainly, therefore, a major departure from established practice for the overwhelmingly manual NUGMW to recruit the highly-skilled membership of the ASBSSBSW to its ranks. Although the 1982 amalgamation is interesting in that it represented a definite attempt on the part of the NUGMW leadership to change the union's image and to adopt an "aggressive"<sup>8</sup> merger strategy, it was the amalgamation nearly sixty years previously, and events prior and subsequent to it, which developed that image and established the democratic and organisational practices of the union.

The amalgamation which formed the NUGMW in 1924 took place at a time of severe economic depression which caused a rapid decline in trade union membership and forced unions into a

series of "defensive" mergers. Not surprisingly, it was the general unions, rather than the longer established unions with strong craft traditions, which suffered most. Table 2.1 compares the percentage loss in membership of the merging partners with that of all unions.

Table 2.1

Trade Union Membership 1920-23

Union	Membership 1920	Membership 1923	Percentage loss
All unions	8,346,000	5,428,000	35
National Union of General Workers	490,000	221,000	55
National Amalgamated Union of Labour	143,000	53,000	63
Municipal Employees Association	65,000	41,000	37

SOURCE: Clegg (1964) p.103.

The losses of the National Amalgamated Union of Labour and the National Union of General Workers were catastrophic and the NUGW's loss would have been even greater if the 1920 membership figures had included the Birmingham Gasworkers and the Womens Workers' Federation, both of which amalgamated with the NUGW in 1921. In contrast the membership of the Municipal Employees Association held up better, primarily because it predominantly organised local authority workers and unemployment was not so severe in the public sector.

Ineluctable though the financial pressures placed on unions by such rapid membership loss were, they were not the only reason that trade unions sought mergers at this time. There was a general enthusiasm for greater unity and concentration. It has been noted that "the war put an end to discussions for a time, but the idea of greater unity had taken a firm hold of the imagination of many trade unionists, both leaders and rank and file."<sup>10</sup> The motto of the GMB until its recent transmogrification, "unity is strength," dates back to these days and it was in this highly charged atmosphere of crisis and unity that a number of different schemes for amalgamation were proposed. Inter-union jealousy<sup>11</sup> played a part in determining the final outcome, but a major determining factor was the personal rivalry and antipathy between Ernest Bevin, the leader of the Dockers and Will Thorne, the Gasworkers leader.<sup>12</sup> It was this rivalry which led to the formation of the Transport and General Workers in 1921 and the NUGMW three years later, establishing general unionism as "the distinctive feature of British Trade Unionism"<sup>13</sup> and setting the pattern for future development.

Thorne and Clynes,<sup>14</sup> were the dominant figures in the merger talks that formed the NUGMW and, since their union, the General Workers, clearly outnumbered the other two, it was natural that they retained their positions as general secretary and president in the amalgamated union. By then, Thorne, a veteran of the "heroic years"<sup>15</sup> 1889-92 which saw



the birth of the "new unionism" of unskilled labourers strongly influenced by socialist ideas, occupied a pre-eminent position in the Labour movement. The leaders of the other unions were quite happy to defer to him and readily accepted that the arrangements for government of the new union should be based on those of the General Workers. Trade union leadership, therefore, played a key role, not only in establishing general unionism but in determining the democratic structures of what was then Britain's second largest trade union.

#### Historical factors determining GMB organisation

There have been many changes since, but, in essence, the structure of the GMB today does not differ radically from that established in 1924.

Under the amalgamation the branches of the three constituent unions retained their identity, but were re-allocated into twelve regions. Each region was to have a council of working delegates, which would meet every six months, and elect from it a committee to run the region between meetings. The regional secretary and a 'lay' member of each region would sit on the General Council and the four largest regions would send an additional lay delegate to ensure that the full-time officers were in a minority. The General Council was to meet every quarter, and to elect five regional secretaries and five of its lay members from regions other than those of the

five elected secretaries, to serve with the general secretary and president as an executive committee. The final authority of the union was to be the Biennial Delegate Congress.

The emphasis on the importance of regions in the process of union government, enshrined in the new structure, developed from the experiences of Thorne's Gasworkers' union. In 1889, when it was founded, all unions faced formidable transport and communication problems which made the formation of national unions extremely difficult and it was during this period that the autonomy of the regions was established. From the outset regions were made financially independent, paying only five per cent of subscription income to head office, and, as early as 1891, their autonomy was emphasised by the union's hesitation over joining a federation proposed by the sailors and firemen because the federation did not allow the districts to affiliate separately. This led Thorne to comment: "we give complete autonomy to our regions ... we found that the terms of the Federation, which would suit a certain region, would not be suitable in another"<sup>14</sup>

The Gasworkers' union began as, and remained for some time, primarily a London union. As the union grew regions were tacked on haphazardly and their growth depended on the ability and energy of the regional secretary.<sup>17</sup> Initially this post was only full-time if the membership warranted it, but by the outbreak of the first world war, the position had been consolidated into a full-time office and the postholder

established as the 'key figure' in the region. The power of this office was strengthened in 1908 by "an unusual provision in the constitution of the union"<sup>19</sup> In the nineteenth century most national unions, to avoid expense, governed the union, between delegate conferences, with an executive committee of lay members drawn from near head office and, when they were formed, the general unions had followed suit. As funds grew a change was made to national executives comprised exclusively of lay members elected by the membership. When the Gasworkers made the change in 1908, however, they chose to elect a governing body composed partly of working members from the regions and partly of regional secretaries, rather than the entirely 'lay' committee of other unions.

Another important structural development, the emergence of the full time branch secretary, was established in the decade before the 1924 amalgamation. In 1911, a young man, Charles Dukes, became secretary of the Warrington branch. His reputation as an agitator made it impossible for him to find work, forcing him to live off the commission he received from collecting membership subscriptions. Through recruiting more members to the branch he was able to increase his 'earnings' from eight shillings to twenty shillings within a year. Clynes, the regional secretary, saw this as an opportunity to ease his administrative workload and persuaded the 1912 Congress that a full-time branch secretary should be allowed where there was "a large branch or a number of branches



amalgamated for that purpose".<sup>17</sup> This decision quickly had a major impact on the organisation of the General Workers as the rapid increase in union membership of the "growth" years, 1911-1920, gave ambitious branch secretaries ample opportunity to make their position full-time.

The 1924 Amalgamation Conference, therefore, did little more than bodily transfer the structure of the General Workers to the new union. The tradition of regional autonomy; the indirect election of lay members to the two national governing bodies, where regional secretaries attended as of right; the branch commission system; and the power of the full-time branch secretary had been established well before and became dominant features of the new union.

Minor structural changes were introduced in 1930. At the Amalgamation Conference it was decided to allow regions to send one delegate to Congress for each 3000 financial members. Delegates were elected by the branches, who cast their total branch membership for candidates regardless of the number attending the branch meeting. In 1930, because of dwindling membership numbers, this was altered to one delegate for each 2000; the block-vote system of elections to Congress and to the regional council, however, remained unchanged. It was also agreed to increase the number of places on the national executive from ten to twelve, to give each region one place and the equal division between regional secretaries and lay members was maintained.

More important during this period was the growing membership concern about the age and ability of the union's officers. The amalgamation rules had required that all officers' posts should come up for election every two years and, accordingly, the first elections under this rule were held in 1926. Nearly all posts were contested and it was evident that most of the opposition candidates were associated with the National Minority Movement - a Communist-sponsored and TUC-condemned Left Wing organisation among trade unionists. Although no officer came anywhere close to being defeated the leaders of the union took a very strong view of the situation. Clynes, presiding over the 1926 Congress, strongly criticized the National Minority Movement in his opening address, claiming "the men who fulminate against leaders are always themselves striving for leadership." When the election results were reported his tone was even more strident, declaiming that "any person in the Union had the right to oppose an old established officer if there was any ground for complaint with regard to his fitness as an official, but he would deplore the tendency to organise opposition ... on other grounds, or that any political motives should direct or influence hostility to officials."<sup>20</sup>

Following this speech the union's rules were amended so that all officials, once elected, were elected for life, with new officers being appointed for a two year probationary period before having to submit themselves for election. The effect



of this rule change at a time of declining membership, the union lost 33% of its members between 1924 and 1933, was that regional and national officers who died or retired were not replaced and those who remained could not be challenged. The average age of officers, therefore, increased rapidly and the union became "a tired administration."<sup>21</sup>

In 1933, Thorne was seventy-six and had been general secretary for forty-four years. Clynes, at sixty-four, had been a full-time officer for over forty years. Both the assistant general secretaries, all four national officers and seven of the twelve regional secretaries were either in their late sixties or in their seventies.<sup>22</sup> Up to 1931 several of these had been Members of Parliament and there were complaints that they spent too much time in the House of Commons. Members made comparisons with the Transport and General Workers Union, whose general secretary, Bevin, was not in Parliament and always seemed to be in the news and producing new proposals. Although the 1930 Congress heavily defeated a motion on compulsory retirement and a similar resolution in 1932 was lost by fifty-eight votes to thirty-nine, the volume of support for compulsory retirement was building up and the 1934 Congress passed a motion asking that the issue be investigated with a report to next Congress.<sup>23</sup> This paved the way for Charles Dukes, who had been elected general secretary earlier that year, to re-organise and modernise the union.



Under the 1936 re-organisation the number of regions was reduced from twelve to ten and the number of places on the national executive reduced accordingly. The office of president was allowed to lapse on the retirement of J.R. Clynes and a new rule provided for the election of a chairman by Congress. The chairman was to hold office for two years and be eligible for re-election. To meet membership demands a new generation of officers were appointed who were much younger than their predecessors; head office was transformed into a modern efficient machine; and economy measures were introduced to make the union more financially viable.

It was the fundamental overhaul of the union's rulebook, however, which has had the greatest lasting significance. Apparently, the wording of the new rules owed a great deal to Dukes' concern that disputes within the union should be kept out of the courts, leading him to take legal advice from Stafford Cripps and phrase the rules so that a branch could have no legal redress against the action of the region. This is still the case today since the union's rules have remained basically unchanged. Branches can be established with as few as twenty members, but not if "in the opinion of the regional secretary sufficient branches have already been established."<sup>24</sup> The regional committee has the power to close any branch or merge any branches "for any reason which it deems good and sufficient, or where, in its judgement, it is considered advisable to do so" and it can "suspend or remove from office any branch officer ... in cases of

incompetency, dishonesty, failure to carry out instructions or decisions of the central executive council, the executive council or the regional council or the regional committee, or for any other reason which it deems good or sufficient."<sup>23</sup> Branch meetings are confined by rule to the members of the branch concerned and members of other branches can only attend with "the knowledge and approval" of the regional secretary.<sup>24</sup> Branches and their members are similarly prevented from communicating to other branches and outside bodies by the sweeping scope of Rule 17.11:

"No address or circular shall be issued by any member or branch unless such address or circular has been approved by the Regional Council or Regional Committee or Executive Council, and no member or members shall divulge the business or affairs of the Union to unauthorised bodies or unofficial journals, or the Press, without such approval. Any member or members of any Branch issuing or distributing any circular or divulging the Union's business or affairs or calling unauthorised meetings without the approval of the Regional Committee, or otherwise committing a breach of this Rule will be suspended from all benefits and liable to be expelled."<sup>25</sup>

This rule has not been constantly in use. Although regions step in from time to time to deal with the misappropriation of branch funds; to settle an unofficial dispute; to declare an election invalid where there have been irregularities; or to discipline branch officers for exceeding their powers or failing in their duties, it is still right to recognise that "the region depends on its branches, and they are normally allowed wide latitude to get on with their own business, so long as no trouble comes to its notice."<sup>26</sup> While this is



true, however, it is equally the case that the union's rules give the regional secretary and regional committee 'wide latitude' to prevent the emergence of opposition or factions which might seek to challenge their authority.

The 1936 re-organisation, therefore, did far more than simply respond to membership pressure to change the union's 'tired leadership'. Through reformulating the union's rule book, it codified the regional concentration of power within the union, giving the regional committee almost absolute power over the branch and providing, potentially at least, strong disincentives to factional development.

### Attitudes and Personality

Analytically separate, but closely related to the structure of the union are those features which provide its distinct personality. Three such 'attitudes' have been particularly prevalent either at certain periods or throughout the GMB's history: nepotism; moderation and loyalty to the Labour party; and 'business unionism'.

Before examining these in more detail, however, it should be noted that some writers believe it is wrong to say that "the union" adopts a particular policy or carries out an action as this in "reification": treating an impersonal abstraction as a social agent, when it is really only people who act.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst accepting this, it must be said that it is little more



than a platitude. When it is said that the union's policy has always been to support the Labour party, what is meant is that Congress and the Executive have always supported the Labour party, and calling this the union's policy is no more than convenient shorthand.

The union's "official history" commendably, makes no attempt to hide the fact that nepotism has been a strong feature of the GMB. It noted of the 1936 re-organisation:

"one feature of the Union which became firmly established during the process of re-organisation was the prominence of certain families in its affairs. Regional secretaries had control of the appointment of their own office staffs and several of them appointed sons or other relatives to clerical posts on their staff ... If they had spirit and ability, such lads, after some years experience, would run for a full-time organisers post"<sup>30</sup>

This has led to a number of family traditions within the union. At the highest level, Tom Williamson, the general secretary from 1946 to 1961, was the nephew of a former Liverpool regional secretary. His successor as general secretary, Jack Cooper, was the nephew of his predecessor, Charles Dukes, while Cooper's successor, David Basnett, general secretary from 1973 to 1984, was the son of a former Liverpool regional secretary and had worked for the union ever since he left school. At national officer level, Fred Hayday and Jack Eccles, both national officers in the 1960s were third generation union employees, while, at regional level, it was quite common during the inter-war period for

sons or relatives of regional secretaries or senior officers to start work as a member of the office staff and eventually become full time organisers themselves.

Nepotism in the union can be traced back to the early days of the Gasworkers when the staffing of the nascent regional offices was regarded as essentially a domestic matter for the regional secretaries. In a climate which was often hostile to trade unionism they needed people they could trust and, not unnaturally, chose members of their family to work with them. During the 1930s nepotism became entrenched at a regional level when there were a number of instances of posts being found for candidates whose main qualification was their relationship with one of the senior officers.<sup>31</sup>

Too much, however, can be made of these family connections. Nepotism has certainly been more prevalent in the GMB than its great rival the TGWU or, indeed, most other unions, principally because the structure of the union has traditionally given great power to the regional secretaries, but promotion to national level has always occurred only in the face of fierce competition. Since the 1936 re-organisation, family ties have also gradually become a less significant factor in determining appointments at the regional level, though it would be illusory to pretend that nepotistic appointments do not still occur.

Moderation and loyalty to the Labour party has been a

hallmark of the GMB ever since its formation; indeed, these twin traditions predate that and were established features of the constituent unions which created the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. The leaders of the Gasworkers union quickly learned the lesson that, among general workers at least, unions can rarely build a satisfactory organisation without winning the goodwill of the employer.

This lack of radicalism in the industrial sphere, however, did not prevent them from forging close links with the socialist sects: Thorne was a member of the SDF, Eleanor Marx-Aveling served on the executive of the union for a number of years, and the union's expansion over the country was helped by local socialist groups. The address of the union, the official statement of its aims and policies, was an entirely Marxist document drawn up by Marx's son-in-law Aveling. It was in stark contrast to the practice of the union which emphasised moderation and sought assistance from the state. Because the 'new' unions had no monopoly of labour supply in any market, they were far more ready to rely on political action as well as industrial strength and took a large part in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee. The Gasworkers were prominent in this respect and J.R. Clynes and Will Thorne were elected to Parliament in 1906, with Pete Curran joining them a year later following a by-election at Jarrow.<sup>32</sup> Clynes, the president of the NUGMW and "the union's most famous figure" was a highly influential champion of "moderation, avoidance of strikes where possible,



the use of all possible means of conciliation, the establishment of good relations with employers, and the virtues of political action."<sup>33</sup>

The first Labour Government was formed in the same year that the NUGMW was established and was strongly supported by the union. Clynes became Lord Privy Seal in the new Government and Margaret Bondfield, the union's Chief Woman Officer, was appointed parliamentary private secretary to the Minister of Labour. Thorne, Dukes and Arthur Hayday were elected to Parliament along with nine other members of the union.<sup>34</sup> In 1926, although the NUGMW executive had certain doubts, it gave full support to the General Strike and Thorne, Hayday and Bondfield, as members of the General Council of the TUC, shared responsibility for calling it off ten days later.

Clynes served as Home Secretary and Bondfield as Minister of Labour in the second Labour Government from 1929 to 1931. Both rejected Ramsay Macdonald's overtures to follow him into coalition and after Labour's crushing defeat at the polls in 1931 the union played a major role in rebuilding the shattered Labour party. It provided loyal support, rejecting demands for a popular front and supporting the expulsion of Stafford Cripps from the Party - Dukes denouncing him as one of "a long list of opportunists who have wrought havoc in our movement"<sup>35</sup> - just three years after seeking his advice on rewriting the union's rulebook.

During the war the GMB and the other unions were entirely in support of the Labour Party's policies on all major issues. After some initial doubts, the union accepted Beveridge's plan for post-war reconstruction and they were strong advocates of the programme of nationalisation and the establishment of the National Health Service pursued by the 1945-51 Attlee Government, co-operating fully in the gas and electricity industries, where they were the major union, and in the Health Service, where they organised a considerable number of workers. Under Tom Williamson as general secretary, the union was "amongst the foremost supporters of the policies of the Labour Government and the TUC for increasing productivity and for wage restraint."<sup>34</sup> In 1950 the union even stood behind Sir Stafford Cripps's pay restraint policy after the TUC had abandoned it. It was a determined opponent of Bevanism and supported German rearmament.

Only once, in 1959, did Congress upset the Labour leadership by voting in favour of unilateral disarmament by a narrow majority, but Williamson called a special Congress of the union within weeks to reverse the decision. Williamson, along with Arthur Deakin of the TGWU, formed a "praetorian guard" of the Labour party leadership; together they wielded roughly one third of the total votes at the Party conference. The block votes dominated elections to the national executive and the conference arrangements committee, and voting on resolutions so much that the leadership won every conference

vote with one minor exception, between 1948 and 1960.<sup>57</sup>

Apart from its loyal, stalwart backing for every twist and turn of Labour orthodoxy the GMB has also developed a reputation for 'business unionism.' The term has been used almost synonymously with moderation: "it is the business of the union to sell labour ... the most successful businessmen keep on good terms with their customers and the union must do so too" with it being argued that the general unions have "raised the establishment of good relations into a general principle."<sup>58</sup>

More commonly, however, business unionism refers to the tendency for a union to treat its members as clients rather than participants: members paying their dues and, in return, expecting certain benefits provided, of course, they do as they are told. This 'clientelism' has been evident from the early years of the union's organisation; it dates back to the development of full-time 'lay' branch secretaries pioneered by Charles Dukes in the Lancashire region. Inexorably, this development led to the formation of large general branches which, in turn, diminished membership interest in its activities, making them remote from the full-time branch secretary and leading him, not unnaturally, to treat them as clients who paid his wages and for whom he administered the branch efficiently.

The extent to which these "Lancashire methods" were adopted



in the union varied from region to region. In some areas there was concern that a few large branches might try between them to rule the affairs of the region and some regions chose, periodically, to split up large branches. Discussions at national level were more concerned with improving the union's recruitment record and debated whether the appointment of recruitment officers at regional level would be a superior means of increasing membership than the full-time branch secretary. In 1944, however, Lancashire methods were introduced into the Southern region with considerable success by Jack Cooper, an ex Lancashire official, who had become Southern regional secretary and, although all regions grew rapidly in the following years, the Southern region outpaced the others. This convinced Cooper of the efficacy of these methods and when he became general secretary of the union in 1962 he used his position to establish "business unionism" even more firmly in the union.

#### The Basnett inheritance

When Basnett formally took up office as general secretary at the beginning of 1974 he inherited stewardship of a union whose organisation was the product of nearly a century's history and whose attitudes spanned a similar period. The former had remained largely unchanged for fifty years, the latter, however, had been strongly shaped and refined by his predecessor.

The sixties were a time of industrial as well as political and social change. Major changes took place in industrial relations: trade union membership grew by 1.3 million during the decade,<sup>39</sup> the number of shop stewards in the UK increased dramatically, as did the growth of workplace bargaining. Britain, according to one study, became "accustomed to consuming strikes with its cornflakes."<sup>40</sup> Many of these strikes were unofficial causing some to argue that unions had lost control over their members.<sup>41</sup> Concern was expressed that both strikes and the level of "wage drift" caused by workplace bargaining were seriously damaging the economy and led to the Government appointing a Royal Commission to investigate the role of trade unions and employers associations. Its report has become a landmark in the industrial relations field, but its immediate result was to prompt the Labour Government's controversial and abortive attempt at industrial relations legislation, the 1969 White paper "In Place of Strife." While other unions were responding to these new circumstances with organisational reforms and changes in attitudes, however, the GMB under Cooper's leadership almost totally ignored the clamouring pressures for change emanating from the membership and from society as a whole. Union attitudes not only remained intact, they were reinforced at a time when membership pressures were going in totally the opposite direction.

The GMB's moderation and loyalty to the Labour Party was, if anything, strengthened during the 1960s, maintaining, as one



survey called it, the "tradition of 'establishment' unionism that developed after the General Strike in 1926."<sup>42</sup> In many ways Cooper's attitudes were very similar to those of J.H. Clynes. While Clynes stressed the importance of maintaining good relations with employers Cooper, over fifty years later in his evidence to the Donovan Commission, took only a slightly different line: "it is an elementary requirement of our basic purpose that we should do everything possible to contribute towards maximising the revenue of a firm or industry to increase the prospects of obtaining better wages and conditions."<sup>43</sup> Although it is unfair to suggest that "every general secretary since Thorne has been so pro-establishment that he has been awarded a peerage,"<sup>44</sup> it is certainly true that the union was particularly loyal to the 1964-70 Wilson government and much of this was due to Cooper's influence, raising again the importance of trade union leadership.

A well respected political commentator has argued that, during this period, trade union leaders "realised the considerable impotence of their position as they conducted, on the one hand, high diplomacy with the Government on behalf of the whole trade union movement while, on the other hand, they struggled with constituents over whom they had little control."<sup>45</sup> It has also been argued that union leaders seemed "to lack the determination to push through policies that would achieve any serious reform of industrial relations and the wage bargaining structure."<sup>46</sup> This was certainly not



true of Cooper. Not only did he get his union to support the Government's incomes policy, he also persuaded them to back "In Place of Strife." At the union's 1969 Congress Cooper told delegates:

"trade unions have much to gain from the White Paper. The violent opposition voiced by several trade unions, and illustrated in their handling of recent disputes, stems from two or three controversial proposals. But, taking the package as a whole, their opposition appears unnecessarily melodramatic and negative."<sup>47</sup>

The result of such a stand, and indeed of the whole Cooper era, was to "maroon" the GMB in "right-wing isolation"<sup>48</sup> and to increase the estrangement of the leadership from the members which had been growing in the union as a result of the increasingly "professional" approach that was being adopted.

Cooper's advocacy of "business unionism" in the 1960s led the union to adopt a benefit-orientated rather than an industrial service-oriented approach. Emphasis was placed on providing educational facilities, convalescent and holiday homes, fatal accident and retirement benefits, rather than servicing the membership in the industrial sphere. It also led to an exaggerated emphasis on financial solvency. Almost immediately after his election as general secretary, Cooper, during the winter of 1962-3 "conducted what must have been the most careful campaign of preparation for any vote at Congress"<sup>49</sup> to ensure that his proposals to boost benefits, and sharply increase membership contributions were passed.

Even so the union was bitterly divided: of the ten regions five supported the leadership, four were opposed, and the Birmingham region was so split on the issue it divided its votes - enabling Cooper to secure a narrow majority for his proposals by 172 votes to 161.<sup>50</sup> This attitude dominated Cooper's thinking and GMB policy throughout his entire tenure of office.

Business unionism had its advantages. The union provided excellent benefits; the research department was made into one of the most effective in the trade union movement; and a residential college was opened at Woodstock in Surrey to educate shop stewards and other lay activists. The union's preoccupation with clientelism and financial stability, however, began to alienate it from its members. Its obsession with financial solvency (union reserves doubled between 1965 and 1970) made it extremely reluctant to sanction strikes causing some members affected to "vote with their feet" and leave the union<sup>51</sup> and the high handed attitudes of many of its officers were deeply resented by many of its members, causing one left-wing activist to brand it as "a scab union."<sup>52</sup>

The Basnett inheritance did include some minor organisational reforms, but they were not initiated by his predecessor. Cooper's response to the changing industrial relations climate was minimally to adapt the union's organisation only when there was no alternative but to do so. As an earlier



study has noted, "all the changes that occurred during Lord Cooper's ten years in office, while providing the potential for fundamental change in the future, were largely cosmetic."<sup>53</sup>

This was particularly apparent in Cooper's response to membership demands for greater involvement in collective bargaining. Largely based on members comparing their opportunities to participate in decision-making with those of work colleagues in the TGWU, these demands produced a number of Congress resolutions in the mid-1960s asking the union to consider introducing a form of trade group structure.

Cooper's view was that:

"the best course would be to graft on to what we already have such changes as current circumstances warrant..."

"While we were carrying out our investigations we became even more convinced of the merits of our way of organising ourselves. If a union is not to disintegrate, it needs central decision-making. On the other hand, over-centralisation can lead to rigidity. Our structure, in my view, gives us the best of both worlds."<sup>54</sup>

The grudging introduction of a few industrial conferences, however, did little to assuage membership demands for more fundamental reform. They were given extremely limited powers and no clear guidelines for their operation. The result was that regional secretaries and national officers were responsible for their running and, since many of them were hostile to the proposals, interpreting them as a threat to their authority, most of them either did not take place or



their influence was virtually non-existent.

The limited reforms of the union's officer structure in 1965, similarly, did little or nothing to solve the problem, widely recognised by both leaders and members, that their perpetual rival the TGWU, and increasingly NUPE, were far better organised at the local level and were leaping ahead in recruiting members. It was felt that the solution to this problem was the creation of a new grade of officer, the branch administrative officer, to fill the vacuum between the membership and the primarily industrially based and of necessity remote regional officers. The details of the reform were not examined thoroughly, however, and, by not specifying any clear role for the new grade of officer, created a recipe for confusion. In effect, this gave regional secretary's the scope to implement or to ignore these reforms as they saw fit.

The internal union politics of the reform were noticeably clearer. It served to restrict the potential for powerful lay full-time branch secretaries to exercise influence within the union at national level by incorporating them in to the union's officer structure. By introducing the new grade the leadership cleverly gave full-time branch secretaries a difficult choice: they could apply to become branch administrative officers and as an employee of the union they would have to give up their elected places on the regional council, committee or at higher levels of the union; or they

could remain in elected office and give up their branch secretaryships, thereby losing their natural base for organising support. Whichever option was chosen, very few were allowed to remain full-time lay branch secretaries, and the position of the leadership was strengthened.

The attitudes of Cooper and many of the national officers inevitably fostered membership opposition to the leadership and by the end of the Sixties the GMB was showing all the characteristics of a worn out and over-heated pressure cooker: there was growing shop floor pressure to have a greater say in industrial disputes and in industrial policy generally; pressure for reform of the union's outdated organisation; and pressure to do something about the union's stagnant membership. These pressures were manifested in the Pilkington's dispute in the early summer of 1970 which was the first major strike at the factory for a century.

The dispute of Pilkington's glass workers in St Helens began as a small stoppage over the miscalculation of wages. It escalated into a strike of over 10,000 workers, nearly all of them GMB members. The union branch supported the strike, but the union's executive refused to make the strike official and a confrontation rapidly developed between the union's leadership and the rank-and-file strike committee, which totally overshadowed the substantive strike issue. As an account written during and immediately after the dispute noted:

"by the third week of the strike Pilkingtons receded into the background - the firm was beginning to wonder if the strike had anything to do with them at all. As regards the union the Rank-and-File Strike Committee had no feelings of ambivalence whatever - just complete, uncomplicated feelings of betrayal."<sup>55</sup>

The strike lasted seven weeks and during all of that time there was open war between the RFSC and the union's leadership. Cooper accused, incorrectly, the RFSC of "red subversion," claimed the strike was being led by Communists and Maoists, and alleged that hooliganism, violence and intimidation were rife. Other members of the union's executive condemned the strikers in similar terms.

For their part the RFSC organised a May day procession led by pall-bearers carrying a coffin inscribed NUGMW - RIP.<sup>56</sup> They also tried to bypass union officials completely, attempting to negotiate a settlement through the Mayor and two local Members of Parliament. The strike ended only after both sides accepted the offer of mediation by the TUC and, in its final stages, the RFSC distributed forms instructing Pilkington's to stop deducting union dues from its wages and attempted, ultimately unsuccessfully, to establish a breakaway union.<sup>57</sup>

The Pilkington's strike was extremely corrosive to the union's public image. It produced banner headlines in the national daily press and a particularly acrimonious Granada TV debate between the strikers and union officials focused public opinion on the union's internal problems. The dispute also



profoundly influenced David Basnett, who was the national industrial officer for the glass industry at the time. While Basnett had a low opinion of some of the strike leaders, he felt the full brunt of membership dissatisfaction with the union, suffering the ignominy of being shouted down at a mass-meeting.<sup>39</sup> The experience confirmed his belief that reform of the union was essential.

After Pilkington's it was simply no longer credible to assert that all the union needed was to graft on minor changes to the union's organisation, though Cooper and the "old guard" of national officers and regional secretaries still tried to do so. The long term significance of the Pilkington's dispute, therefore, was the impetus it gave to those in the union who supported reform and the culmination of this was the election of David Basnett as general secretary. In this sense Pilkington's "acted as a catalyst for other changes not immediately related to it"<sup>40</sup> increasing membership demands not only for greater access to the decision-making process on bargaining issues, but for industrial conferences and for closer contact with full-time officers.

The GMB in the Cooper era has been summarised as being a union in which "a conservative organisational bias traditionally complemented an authoritarian (and nepotistic) leadership and right-wing politics."<sup>40</sup> It is not an unfair description of the union at that time. When Basnett took up office, however, in the aftermath of the Pilkington's

dispute, the prevailing mood among the membership was for change. Nevertheless, the entrenched conservatism of many of the regional secretaries, in a union which has traditionally given a great deal of autonomy to its regions, and the opposition to any reform of a number of national officers, presented formidable obstacles to any attempts to fundamentally overhaul the union's structure. Moreover, the GMB's business unionism attitudes and benefit oriented approach had been deeply embedded and would not easily be removed. This was Basnett's inheritance.

It provides the base for subsequent chapters which seek to assess the impact that the changes in the GMB's organisation and attitudes that have occurred since Basnett took office have had on membership participation in decision-making. This begins by examining the union at national level.

MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION AND THE  
NATIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM ;

As Chapter One noted, the Webb's were the first to apply seriously the parliamentary model of democracy to trade unions. In their research at the turn of the century they discovered:

"the appearance in the trade union world of the typically modern form of democracy, the elected representative assembly, appointing and controlling an executive committee under whose discretion the permanent official staff perform its work."<sup>1</sup>

This approach was followed by much of the earlier literature on trade union organisation<sup>2</sup> and was, at least in part, inspired by the overt importance that most union leaders and members attached to the representative structures of their annual conferences. This is still apparent in the GMB. As the union's chairman told the second conference of the amalgamated union in 1985, "Congress is the supreme Parliament of the union."<sup>3</sup> More recent studies, however, have recognised that power is often wielded through informal processes, though these have tended to focus on the local level<sup>4</sup> with only one or two exceptions.<sup>5</sup>

The dynamics of the formal and informal processes through which power is exercised has been termed the union's "political system:" an "institutional framework ... within which internal forces co-operate and/or contend and policies



are formulated and implemented."<sup>4</sup> The scope of this chapter is narrower than this definition, since policy implementation in the GMB on non-bargaining administrative issues and many bargaining issues is dependent on the co-operation and interpretation of regional secretaries, which is examined in later chapters. It focuses on the national political system, by which is meant the relationship between Congress, the general secretary and the Executive Council.

Since the 1982 amalgamation the GMB has had three Executive Councils; a Central Executive Council and separate Executive Councils for the GMW and Boilermakers sections. This is a temporary measure and the 1987 Congress has agreed that a single Executive Council be formed. For clarity and simplicity the term Executive Council has been used throughout this study when referring to the principal decision-making body at national level, though, since 1982, it should, strictly speaking, be called the Central Executive Council.

Inevitably, the highly regionalised nature of the GMB is still apparent in discussions of the operation of the union at a national level because of the regionalised basis of membership of the Executive Council, where regional secretaries have traditionally attended as of right. It is not, however, the primary focus of this chapter. This is to delineate the types of decisions taken at a national level - the vertical dispersion of power - and to examine the scope

within the GMB's national political system for the membership to participate in those decisions - the horizontal dispersion of power at the national level. The chapter develops the themes of union organisation and union attitudes introduced in the previous chapter.

### The national political system

The GMB's rules govern the basic relationships between the union's annual Congress, the general secretary and the Executive Council. They vest "supreme authority" in Congress<sup>7</sup> where representation is on a regional basis with one delegate for each 2,000 members.<sup>8</sup> The main decision-making business of Congress is "the consideration and determination of internal questions of policy affecting the general, industrial, political or social welfare of the members."<sup>9</sup> Congress is further given the power to remove any member or members of the Executive Council and appoint their successors.<sup>10</sup>

Constitutionally, the Executive Council is charged with responsibility for the government of the union and the conduct of trade disputes.<sup>11</sup> It is given powers even beyond those explicitly provided for by rule, since the union's rules provide that it:

"may exercise all and any such powers and perform all such acts, duties and obligations as may be necessary to attain or are incidental to or conducive to the

attainment of the objects and general interests of the Union whether such powers, duties and obligations are specifically mentioned in these rules or not."<sup>12</sup>

Any decision reached by the Executive Council is constitutionally binding on members<sup>13</sup> and, if necessary, the Executive holds the power to suspend or disband any region or regional council.<sup>14</sup> It is also the "supreme authority" over all the GMB's officers<sup>15</sup> including the general secretary.<sup>16</sup>

The GMB's rules give very few formal powers to its general secretary. Although he has right to attend and speak at Executive Council meetings<sup>17</sup> his de jure role is purely administrative. The rule book specifies that: "he shall be responsible for the conduct of all correspondence, keeping all books, documents, papers and accounts,"<sup>18</sup> and for controlling the finances of the union.<sup>19</sup> In reality, however, the views of the general secretary, as the de facto leader of the union, naturally carry great weight both with Executive Council members and delegates to Congress.

### Congress and membership participation

The main opportunity for the membership to participate in decision-making at national level is through Congress, the union's representative assembly. This can be done by branches submitting resolutions to be debated at Congress and through electing delegates to attend as the region's representatives. Regional elections, including those for the Congress delegation, are examined in detail in Chapter 5, but



it should be noted at this point that the union's rules do not facilitate informed decision-making in these elections.

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The rule book specifies that branches "may submit motions on any subject" for inclusion in the Congress agenda. The procedure is that these proposals have to be forwarded to the regional secretary by the end of January who has to send them to the general secretary within a week.<sup>20</sup> No limit is placed on the number of resolutions that a branch can submit; one Militant controlled branch in Liverpool, to take an extreme example, sent 27 resolutions to its regional secretary in 1985. There is no guarantee, however, that once these resolutions appear on the preliminary Congress agenda they will be debated at Congress. To stand a chance of this they must first be placed on the final Congress agenda published in May. This is compiled following individual regional delegation meetings, which comprise the regional secretary, the elected delegates and one third of the regions full-time officers who attend Congress as ex-officio delegates.<sup>21</sup>

At the regional delegation stage the Executive Council, the regional secretary and the full-time officers all have a chance to make their views known. The delegations discuss not only whether motions originating from their own region should go forward to the final agenda, but also their position on the issues contained in resolutions and documents from the Executive Council and in important resolutions from other regions. As far as a region's own resolutions are

concerned the delegation can decide to support or withdraw motions, or allow them to stand but be moved without the support of the region.

Interview evidence and observation at the 1985 Congress suggests that the Liverpool and Northern regions tend to allow motions to be moved without their support while the Birmingham region does not. Nearly all of the Liverpool Number 5 branch's 27 resolutions were moved in this way. One Birmingham region delegate to the 1985 Congress said he was "disgusted" with the way the delegation meeting was run claiming "there was no discussion, the regional secretary got up and told us how we were going to vote." Delegates to the 1982 and 1984 Congresses<sup>22</sup> told similar stories about the lack of lay participation in delegation meetings. In the Northern region delegation meetings decision-making appears to be consensual. The views of the regional secretary and the officers are very similar to those of the members, reflecting the homogenous political culture of Northern trade unionism, but it is accepted that it is the members who make the final decision. In the Liverpool region, however, decision-making is factional and dependent on the political balance between the lay delegates.

The research evidence clearly suggests that lay participation in regional delegation meetings varies considerably from region to region. It is principally dependent on two factors: the electoral system which produces these

delegations (which will be examined in a later chapter); and the different political attitudes and levels of political activity of regions (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Some indication of the different regional traditions of political activity, however, can be gained from the number of motions each submits to Congress and this can be identified through content analysis of the Congress final agenda. Table 3.1 breaks down the resolutions submitted to the 1985 Congress into regions.

Table 3.1

Motions appearing on the 1985 final Congress agenda analysed by region.

Region	Number of motions
Birmingham	4
Northern	28
Liverpool	12
London	21
Southern	31
South West	2
Lancashire	16
Yorkshire	4
Midlands & E Coast	24
Scottish	21

SOURCE: 1985 Preliminary Congress Agenda.

Even if motions reach the final Congress agenda this does not mean that they will be debated. This will depend on the standing orders committee which is appointed prior to Congress. It has one member per region and Executive Council members are excluded from its membership.<sup>23</sup> It is not



unusual, however, for senior members of this committee to have served on it continuously for ten or more years and have close contacts with the general secretary and Executive Council members who may offer advice in certain instances. Agenda management of the type noted in the Labour party,<sup>24</sup> therefore, is possible through the standing orders committee which has the power to ask a delegation again to withdraw a motion, composite it with others, or not timetable it for discussion. The standing orders committee can also disqualify motions and it has adopted the practice of declaring out of order any motion which would require a rule amendment to put into effect, involves joint industrial council matters, or could be referred to a national industrial conference.

The GMB's annual Congress is limited, therefore, to the discussion of non-bargaining issues and bargaining issues of a very general nature. There are also formidable organisational barriers which can prevent controversial or left-wing resolutions from being debated at Congress. The result is that the GMB's Congress is sanitised and most of its debates uncontroversial. The important resolutions at Congress are nearly always those in the name of the Executive Council and their recommendation on other resolutions is nearly always accepted.

An interesting comparison can be made with the annual conference of the National Communications Union, which in

1985 was held at the same time and place as the GMB's Congress. Anyone visiting Blackpool that week could be forgiven for thinking that it was the NCU not the GMB that was Britain's second largest trade union. Less than a sixth of the size of the GMB it had nearly three times more delegates to its conference. Members rather than officers dominated debates and its Executive was defeated on a number of resolutions. Similar findings were discovered when the union's political system was studied a decade ago.<sup>25</sup> In comparison the GMB appeared staid and boring. While the fact that the NCU discusses its pay claim at conference explains part of the reason for its vitality, so too does its factionalism, which is hardly evident in the GMB. There seems particularly little justification for the GMB's relatively small number of Congress delegates, one per two thousand members, when the larger TGWU manages one per thousand members at its Biennial Delegate Conferences.

#### **The Executive Council and the general secretary**

There have been two decisions to change the composition of the union's national representative institutions since 1970. The first in 1975 saw the disbandment of the general council and the national executive and its replacement with a single Executive Council. The second, agreed at the union's 1987 Congress, has still to be implemented, but involves changing the method of election of the Executive Council and including reserved seats for women.



delegates at regional council meetings. Nevertheless, Edmonds' voice has been influential in the union agreeing, for the first time, to reserve seats on its Executive Council for women. The new Executive Council will comprise 40 delegates elected by individual ballot rather than the customary branch block vote. Each region will elect four delegates; one seat is a separate contest for women candidates only; in the other three all lay members and the regional secretary are eligible to stand.

The prospect of a regional secretary not sitting on the union's main national body, which is possible under the new rules, would have been unthinkable even ten years ago. The new rules, however, should not be thought to be necessarily a further dilution of the power of regional secretaries, even though numerically this is the case. The politics of the reform proposals evinced the continued influence of the regional secretaries. There were three different options on how to comply with the 1984 Act: elect a totally lay EC; allow regional secretaries to attend as non-voting members; and allow regional secretaries to stand for election to the EC. Ambitious regional secretaries, wanting to maintain their influence on the Executive Council, ensured that the latter option was adopted. It remains to be seen whether, as one regional secretary interviewed said, "no regional secretary worth their salt should ever get defeated."

The Executive Council appoints both standing and ad hoc sub-



Prior to 1975 the general council was, according to the union's rules, the final authority of the union between Congresses.<sup>24</sup> It comprised the chairman, general secretary, the ten regional secretaries and fourteen lay members, one from each region, plus an extra one from the four largest regions to ensure that lay members were in a majority. Most national officers used to attend in an advisory capacity. It met only every two months, however, and the important decision-making body was the national executive which comprised ten members, one from each region, split equally between regional secretaries and lay members. In 1975 under Basnett's guidance this was replaced by a single Executive Council comprising the chairman, general secretary, and three members from each region, one of which was to be the regional secretary. The reform, therefore, although not moving to an all lay executive such as in the TGWU, which would have been politically unacceptable to the regional secretaries, extended the opportunity for lay membership participation in national decision-making.

There is a parallel between this reform, instituted shortly after Basnett came to office, and the 1987 reform, agreed shortly after Edmonds' election as general secretary. In the 1987 case, however, the initiative for reform has stemmed from the legal requirements of the Government's 1984 trade union act. This necessitates a directly elected Executive Council, instead of the normal GMB practice of electing lay

delegates at regional council meetings. Nevertheless, Edmonds' voice has been influential in the union agreeing, for the first time, to reserve seats on its Executive Council for women. The new Executive Council will comprise 40 delegates elected by individual ballot rather than the customary branch block vote. Each region will elect four delegates; one seat is a separate contest for women candidates only; in the other three all lay members and the regional secretary are eligible to stand.

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The Executive Council appoints both standing and ad hoc sub-

therefore, provided a rare opportunity for factional activity to emerge more clearly, as will be discussed later.

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### Changes under Basnett

It is widely felt among GMB members and officers that the union became more democratic under Basnett's stewardship. This general acceptance is a significant testament to Basnett's abilities. As Chapter Two showed, he inherited a union with an out-dated organisation, right-wing politics, and anti-strike and clientelist attitudes with powerfully entrenched vested interests opposing reform. Examining all the organisational and attitudinal changes that took place under Basnett's leadership, however, would be an enormous task and is not attempted. It would also not be particularly relevant. The purpose of this study is to examine the GMB's democracy, not write its history, and its focus is on decision-making processes, not on the detail of the decisions themselves.

For the record, apart from the 1982 amalgamation, the most significant changes that have occurred in the GMB's organisation over the past fifteen years have been the introduction of the industrial conference structure, changes in officer structure, the reform of the general council and national executive, the introduction of the equal rights



machinery, and the changes required to the Executive Council under the 1984 Trade Union Act. Since membership participation in collective bargaining is a major point of reference for this study and as policy implementation has been crucial to officer structure changes, which, in any event were largely determined before Basnett took office, the first two of these changes are discussed separately in Chapter Six.

Within the organisational and attitudinal changes that Basnett was instrumental in generating, three separate themes encouraging membership participation can be identified. First, the extension of lay participation in decisions taken at national level on bargaining and non-bargaining issues. Second, reforms to encourage greater participation in the union's structures of over a third of the GMB's members, women. Third, the attempts to encourage a higher membership involvement in political activities. The first of these themes indicates the discretion that the general secretary has at national level; the other two show the limitations, emphasising how national initiatives need regional commitment and co-operation. They will be examined in turn.

#### Changes at national level

The reforms of the GMB's organisation in the Basnett era were all debated and approved at Congress. As the examination of the operation of the GMB's national political system has

revealed, however, while these and other major policy issues require Congress approval, the GMB's general secretary is in a powerful position to make policy within the union on non-bargaining issues. Nevertheless, there are constraints on his position: he has to win the support of enough regions to get his proposals through the Executive Council and Congress. These constraints are more likely to be apparent in the case of administrative issues, which encroach on the fiefdom of the regional secretaries or lay executive members, than they are on political issues where there is more likely to be agreement.

The reality of decision-making in the GMB, therefore, is that proposals to reform the union's organisation need to secure a majority on the Executive Council to have any chance of success and this requires skilful diplomacy on the part of the general secretary. The change from the old general council and national executive structure reflects the strategies that need to be adopted. The proposals finally implemented represented a compromise between the different interests. Basnett was able to use the discontent of half of the regional secretaries who were excluded from the main policy making body, the national executive, to construct a majority with independent thinking lay members, which produced a single Executive Council with a higher proportion of lay membership.

Membership pressure has been an important factor in



facilitating organisational change. The catalytic effect of the Pilkington's dispute was the most obvious manifestation of this, but fundamental ~~to~~ later organisational reforms has been the practice, cultivated by Basnett, of extensively consulting the membership on change proposals. This opening up of the policy-making process was in marked contrast to his predecessor and reflected both Basnett's personal preference for consensual change and his recognition that grass-roots support could be used effectively against intransigent elements on the Executive Council. The consolidation of the industrial conference structure in 1981 and the Decision 84 proposals were carried following a period of consultation lasting nearly two years.

The consultation process, although a significant improvement on policy formulation in the Cooper era, nevertheless had its limitations. Consultation on policy proposals not policy options took place. The scope for membership participation in influencing decisions was effectively limited, therefore, to suggesting minor improvements or alterations to the consultative document rather than making fundamental changes. Moreover, while branches received copies of the consultative proposals and could codify their comments in resolutions, the consultation process on the reform of the industrial conference structure revolved round regions forming a collective view and expressing it at Congress, making any comments easily susceptible to entrenched regional interests. Consultation was improved on Decision 84's proposals with



branches submitting views to their region, which passed them on to head office, as well as being able to submit Congress resolutions. The importance of this consultation, however, is better seen as legitimating difficult decisions that the Executive Council were taking than affording members with a realistic opportunity to participate in policy formulation.

At least as significant as the organisational changes and the partial opening up of policy making that occurred during the Basnett era were the changes that occurred in union attitudes. The principal changes that can be distinguished were the GMB's moving away from its "business unionism" attitudes and its shift towards the centre of the trade union movement. It is not possible, however, to identify one decision, or even a number of decisions, which produced key changes in the union's business unionism attitudes since this attitude is as much an impression or image as it is substance. This complicates analysis, but four factors indicate some of the variations in the scope and in the role of membership participation in this change.

First, Basnett was a central figure in the union's gradual movement away from business unionism. His management style set the tone for the union. As shown in the organisational reforms, this was consensual and tried to involve membership participation rather than authoritarian. Second, although a model can be set nationally the general secretary cannot ensure that it is adopted regionally. A number of regions

continued with business unionism attitudes throughout his period of office. Despite Basnett encouraging the union to move towards a more workplace-based branch structure which would encourage membership participation in the union, the Lancashire region, in particular, maintained its tradition of large general branches and, as the next chapter shows, branch structures varied widely in different regions.

Third, apart from regional variations in the prevalence of business unionism, there are also variations within regions and industries. This is because a large part of business unionism is concerned with the relationship between officers and members and varies according to individual national and regional officers. Lastly, business unionism attitudes, particularly the union's anti-strike image, had been increasingly rejected by the membership during the latter part of Cooper's leadership, with Pilkington's being one of a string of examples. It had become increasingly untenable as a philosophy for a union which wanted to attract and maintain members.

The transformation of the GMB from a right-wing to a centrist union in the TUC and the Labour party can be more straightforwardly attributed to the personal influence of its general secretary. While the union's position on major political issues is determined at Congress, such as the decision to support unilateral nuclear disarmament taken at the 1985 Congress, the general secretary, with the Executive



Council, has the power to determine policy as issues arise. Furthermore, as the "ambassador" of one of Britain's largest unions he is, more or less, expected to play a major role in the wider trade union movement and in the Labour party. The general secretary thus has considerable discretion to form his own judgement on the union's attitude to events in this field and to use his ability to ensure that it is backed up by the Executive Council and ultimately Congress.

Basnett has played a pivotal role in the trade union and Labour movement since the mid-1970s. By his own account this role has been "obsessionally centrist."<sup>39</sup> He served continuously on the TUC general council from 1966, when he succeeded to a national officers seat, through to his retirement at the end of 1985. As the senior member of the union side of the National Economic Development Council, the "Neddy Six," he was heavily involved in the tri-partite negotiations during the 1974-79 Labour Government and a strong supporter of the Government's social contract pay policy. More recently, he led the TUC first out of and then back into NEDC over the Government's withdrawal of trade union rights at GCHQ. He also called for disciplinary action to be taken against the AEU and the EETPU for taking Government money for postal ballots and was one of the leading voices behind the changes in the TUC's structure to make it more representative by automatically allotting seats to unions with over 100,000 members.



In the Labour party, Basnett was prominent not only in maintaining the union's tradition of loyal support, but played a highly significant part in shaping policy on economic and industrial policy after 1979. This was done through the TUC-Labour party liaison committee to which Basnett's head of research and close supporter, Larry Whitty, was secretary. The key parts of the 1983 election manifesto were little more than a compendium of statements issued by the committee. Basnett and Whitty were prominent in developing the central economic policy proposal for a "national economic assessment" to agree the overall level of wages in the economy, and Basnett played an important role in persuading other trade unions to support this policy.

The GMB under Basnett has also been intimately involved with the more mundane areas of Labour party finance and administration. Basnett chaired the party's 1978 committee of inquiry into its structure, organisation and finances. It was also through his initiative as general secretary that Trade Unionists for a Labour Victory was formed in 1981 to provide funds for the party and Basnett acted as its first chairperson.

#### Women's participation in decision-making

Women comprise 34 per cent of the GMB's membership but have traditionally played a very minor part in the union. For the first time, however, the GMB under Basnett in the 1970s began

to address itself seriously to the problem of encouraging greater women's participation in the union, which has led to the recent decision that one quarter of the seats on the reformed Executive Council will be reserved for women.

In many ways, the new proposals for reserved seats for women that were controversially agreed at the 1987 Congress<sup>40</sup> turn the union full circle. When the main separate women's trade union, the National Federation of Women Workers merged with the National Union of General Workers in 1921, it did so as a separate national "region" and although this changed a year later there were still separate women's branches, a women's department at head office, and women were to be entitled to separate representation at Congress and on the union's General Council.<sup>41</sup> After the 1924 amalgamation, however, the role of the women's department and women's representation was quickly marginalised and Margaret Bondfield, the women's officer and a Minister in the first Labour government, had to be persuaded not to resign in protest.<sup>42</sup> From this point the influence of women within the union declined steadily.

The need to encourage greater women's participation in the union was recognised in the 1976 reforms of the Industrial Conference structure which also set up regional and national equal rights conferences to provide a platform for the articulation of issues of special concern to women members. A year later the Executive Council, under Basnett's influence, agreed that each region should designate an Equal



Rights Officer to improve communications between women members and the national level, but these measures were not successful in getting more women participating in the union. As a result, following motions referred to it from the 1978 and 1979 Congresses, the Executive Council set up regional equal rights advisory committees to encourage greater women's involvement in the union believing that the annual regional and national equal rights conferences "might be more effective if there was some linkage between them and a continuous forum for discussion of equal rights as applied to women workers."<sup>43</sup>

The 1984 regional equal rights conference in the Birmingham region highlighted some of the difficulties in increasing women's participation in the union. While there was no doubting the enthusiasm of the forty or so delegates present and the genuineness of the desire to improve the position of women in the union, a lack of procedural awareness, a problem in an overwhelmingly manual union and not just related to women, tended to prevent suggestions being pursued in the most effective manner. One of the workshops that were held, following prompting from the outside chair, reported back proposals for the national equal rights conference to be allowed to submit resolutions to Congress and to choose members who would have reserved seats on the Executive Council. It also argued for the regional equal rights conference to elect delegates to the regional TUC and Labour Party women's conferences (at present they are appointed by



the regional committee). But the response to these proposals was not to codify them in a resolution, instead, commenting on the absence of the regional secretary during the report back stage, the chairperson said "very interesting ... it is a shame the gaffer didn't hear it." Likewise, there were very few resolutions submitted to the conference and of the six tabled three had been written by the regional equal rights officer on behalf of the committee.

In the Birmingham region some members of the equal rights committee have become disillusioned about its lack of progress. These feelings have arisen from the failure of attempts to reform the region's sick pay scheme to include pregnancy related illnesses and because of the lack of co-operation of certain powerful lay branch secretaries and district officers who, it was said, had "incredibly sexist" attitudes. There has also been tension between the equal rights committee and the regional committee, with the latter blocking some of the equal rights committee's initiatives, refusing to provide money for a women's rally or for a joint political education course with the Labour party for women only.

In contrast, the regional committee in the Liverpool region appears to be more sympathetic to women's issues and conflict has not arisen; indeed the region also supports an ad hoc race relations committee. The Birmingham experience, however, has been better than some other regions. By 1984

only the Birmingham, Liverpool, Northern and Midlands and East Coast regions had properly functioning equal rights committees and, at least, the Birmingham region, for the first time, did not have any men on its committee. This is still not the case at national level: the 1983 national equal rights conference held in December had only 55 delegates of whom 15 were men. It did, nevertheless, overwhelmingly pass motions on reserved seats which were defeated the year previously.

Women's participation in the GMB's decision making bodies at national and regional level, despite the equal rights structure changes, has been extremely low. There was only one woman delegate to the 1983-85 Executive Council and only three women have ever served as members. As Table 3.2 shows, in no region does the proportion of women on the regional council reach one quarter; the Scottish region, where women total nearly half the GMB's membership, comes closest with 24 per cent. Arguably the best region for the number of women it has on the regional council is Liverpool, with Birmingham the worst, and the Northern region close to bottom. The problem, however, seems to be that women are not getting nominated to the regional council rather than they are being discriminated against in the electoral contest.

Regional committee women's representation is even more limited. Only one woman was nominated for election to the 1983-85 regional committee in each of the three study



regions, candidatures being successful in Birmingham and Liverpool but not in the Northern region. The situation is no better in the other GMB regions. Only the London and Southern regions have two women on their committee, the Yorkshire and Midland and East Coast regions have none and the rest one. Similarly, women are under-represented at Congress. At the important 1984 Congress there was only one woman delegate from the Birmingham region and 35 men. In total out of the 432 Congress delegates only 58 were women.

Table 3.2

Analysis of regional percentage of women members, and percentage of women nominated and elected to the 1983-85 regional council.

Region	% Women	% Nominated	% Elected
Birmingham	22.0	4.0	5.1
Lancashire	30.8	8.4	10.3
Liverpool	34.0	14.0	17.1
London	13.5	7.3	7.3
Midland & E.C.	28.3	10.9	6.3
Northern	30.2	8.1	9.1
Scottish	47.1	18.4	24.0
Southern	26.5	12.0	11.8
South West	36.4	na	14.3
Yorkshire	36.3	8.0	9.6

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984c) p131 and regional secretaries reports.

Women are also under-represented on union training courses, particularly on advanced and specialised courses. In 1983, 20 per cent of GMB members attending the TUC Stage One Course were women, but the proportion on the Stage Two Course was only 14 per cent and for specialised courses such as on



social security benefits, which have been thought to be particularly relevant to women, it was as low as four per cent.

It was pressure from women submitting motions to Congress in 1983 and 1984 however, supported by Basnett, which led to the Executive Council setting up a working party which produced a report "Women in the Union". This was debated at Congress in 1985. It recommended that at least one reserved place per region be reserved for women when the Executive Council was re-constituted to comply with the 1984 Trade Union Act and was passed with the support of seven of the ten GMB regions, paving the way for the 1987 Congress decision. The task of changing male attitudes in a traditionally male dominated manual union, however, is a formidable one and, despite these reforms, achieving a significantly higher level of women's participation in the union is likely to remain a problem.

#### **Participation in political activity: regional differences**

Basnett's close involvement with the Labour party was both a confirmation and a modification of the GMB's traditional stance as a loyalist union. While under Cooper the union's attitude was to passively, diligently and unquestioningly support the vicissitudes of the Labour party leadership's thinking on policy matters, Basnett developed a much more pro-active role for the GMB on political issues. Part of this strategy was to encourage membership participation in

political issues at a local and regional level.

The following brief survey<sup>2-</sup> of political activity and organisation in three regions reveals significant differences. It confirms the point noted earlier that national attitudinal changes are not necessarily reflected regionally and, in highlighting this regional autonomy, it reinforces the validity of the focus of subsequent chapters. It does, however, also show that regional political activity is constrained by national union policy.

It is widely recognised within the GMWU that the Northern region is the most politically organised. This is partly a function of the union's dominant position among trade unions in the North, but it is also a legacy of Cunningham's period as regional secretary, which exhibited many of the characteristics of a "popular bossdom".<sup>44</sup> Cunningham was one of "more colourful political figures" in the North, a "moderate trade union boss."<sup>45</sup> In addition to being Northern regional secretary, Cunningham was not only a member of the national executive of the Labour party he was also: chairman of the Newcastle airport committee and chairman of the Tyneside passenger transport authority; a member of the Northern planning council; and chairman of Durham county council, Durham police authority and the Northumbrian river authority.

Cunningham used this extensive influence to promote both the

union and Labour party policies and encouraged the union's regional officers to forge close links with the Labour party, particularly in local government, as well as encouraging the membership to play an active role in politics generally.

This strategy of focusing on local politics was the only one open as campaigning on national political issues was heavily circumscribed by the acquiescent policy advocated by Cooper nationally. While other trade unions were campaigning against the Labour Government's 1968 White Paper "In Place of Strife," including a May day token strike, the GMB in the Northern region was almost silent and, when pushed, indicated its support for the Government. The region, similarly played virtually no part in trade union campaigns in the North against the Conservative Government's 1971 Industrial Relations Act, reflecting Cooper's equivocal action to the legislation.

While the scope for a region to develop a positive image for the union in its area was seriously limited by the union's policies under Cooper, this changed under Basnett. The Northern region still has close local government links - as one regional officer put it "you've got to be in where it counts"- but, particularly since Burlison was elected regional secretary, the region has extended its campaigning on national political issues and improved its political organisation. The Northern regional committee regularly invites major political figures to speak to the members; the first joint engagement of the newly elected Kinnock-



Hattersley leadership was to speak to 2,500 GMB members at a rally in Newcastle. Political weekend schools and seminars are a prominent feature and members are strongly encouraged to participate in campaigns and join the Labour party.

An important forum in encouraging membership participation has been the regular meetings with branch chairs and secretaries held quarterly on a county basis that Burlison has instituted. Increasing political awareness amongst the membership and improving levels of political activity have been consistently stressed at these meetings and it is generally felt that they have been a major success not only in improving communications within the region, but also in promoting political activism. One measure of this is that over 80 per cent of the region's branches are affiliated to local Labour party constituency management committees. While, in some regions, the GMB's political fund ballot was the first organised political activity that members had seen, in the Northern region it merely reinforced the message that the region was already putting across.

The political attitude of the region's membership can be described as predominantly moderate Labour, or solidaristic, reflecting the political culture of the North as a whole. Consequently, although there are political differences amongst activists in the region, they are expressed within relatively narrow parameters and do not dominate what happens. Those few members with extreme political views find

it difficult to get them expressed as the scope for disagreement is set by the officers who, almost without exception, are on the centre-right<sup>2</sup> of the Labour party. A number of regional officers interviewed said that they were not prepared to tolerate GMB delegates to Labour party bodies expressing extremist views; a typical view was that "there is no problem with sincere left-wing Socialists, but individuals who wander to the hard left will have their branches disaffiliated."

The situation in the Liverpool region is completely different. Politically it can be divided between Liverpool and the rest. Outside Liverpool political attitudes are very much the same as anywhere else in the country, but within the city there is a tradition of political awareness born out of hardship and a close sense of community, influenced by Catholicism, that is quite distinctive. In certain areas, principally local government, these attitudes have been exploited by extreme left-wing elements which have joined the GMB. In 1985 the GMB was the only union which supported to the bitter end the actions of the Militant dominated Liverpool city council in its confrontation with the Government over refusing to make a rate. Officers freely admitted the existence of a Militant faction<sup>46</sup> within the region, even going as far as saying that "if the region speaks with one voice it is a Militant one."

In the political climate of the GMB in Liverpool any regional



attempt to stimulate membership political participation would be otiose. The political organisation system of the Northern region is more than unnecessary in the Liverpool region; it would be highly dangerous, giving Militant activists, unrepresentative of the membership as a whole, extra opportunities to make public statements and influence GMB policy. In short, the radical traditions of Liverpool mean that the regional leadership's problems lie more with controlling and channelling political activity than they do in stimulating it. The region, however, does provide a clear example of factional activity, for and against Militant, stimulating membership participation in the region's decision-making bodies which is examined in more detail in later chapters.

In contrast, the Birmingham region possesses neither the political organisation and solidarity of the Northern region nor the political partisanship of Liverpool. Membership participation on political issues within the union and the Labour party and trade union movement is virtually non-existent. While the Northern and Liverpool regions, parallelling Basnett's national initiatives, have played major roles within their respective regional TUC's and in the Labour party, the GMB in Birmingham has had no political profile worth speaking of.

Since Geoff Wheatley's appointment as regional secretary in 1979 attempts have been made to rectify this. In his own



words, Wheatley has "tried to open the door for more people to get involved," but this has been slow in materialising. In its absence he sees the <sup>2-</sup>union's political role as "reflecting adequately and properly the views of the members" through utilising the region's officers, who are expected to play an active part in regional politics. While, it has been reported, his predecessor used to punish officers he did not like by appointing them to the regional Labour party, Wheatley has chosen people who have an interest in Labour party politics and the GMB's image has improved accordingly. It nevertheless retains an essentially passive political orientation which makes it appear almost as if it has been in a time warp. As far as the Birmingham region is concerned, Basnett might never have existed, its political attitudes and the level of its membership participation are still locked in the Cooper era.

### The election of John Edmonds

The retirement of Basnett as general secretary provided, apart from the union's political fund ballot, the first opportunity for the membership to vote at a national level since his election twelve years previously. The GMB's general secretary has considerable power; it is the most important post in the union. The election was, therefore, a rare occasion when the membership could participate in deciding the type of union they wanted through choosing the person who would lead the union in the 1990s. It is thus of

prime concern to any study of membership participation in the GMB.

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The GMB's election of its general secretary in 1985 was held at a time when top level changes were occurring in a number of trade unions. The EETPU had elected Eric Hammond as Frank Chapple's successor the year previously. USDAW had elected Garfield Davies, widely regarded as the centrist in a three-cornered contest, as its general secretary in the week before the GMB's ballot started. The TGWU had just confirmed Ron Todd as its general secretary after a straight left-right fight in a repeat ballot held following allegations of voting irregularities in the previous election. While, in the AUEW candidates had already emerged for the left-right battle to elect Terry Duffy's successor as President which was to take place shortly after the GMB's general secretary contest.

The contest which elected John Edmonds as David Basnett's successor, however, unlike those of the other major unions, was not fought on party political lines and none of the three main candidates took a markedly political stance. To some extent this is traditional in the GMB. In the 1973 contest, although Basnett was regarded as the candidate for change, the election was not party political and nor were the elections of Cooper and Williamson before him. The Executive Council also took steps to ensure that this tradition was followed by ruling that candidates must not discuss the general secretary election with the media and, early in the



election campaign, rebuked one of the main contenders for doing so.

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The opportunity for political factional activity was thus minimal and the Executive Council's actions certainly produced dissatisfaction amongst GMB members from the broad left who criticised the "non-election of the general secretary" taking place. A number of them cited the Executive Council's ruling as being the main factor behind the broad left deciding not to put forward a candidate in the election. They felt aggrieved that with this and the union's rules forbidding inter-branch communication any non-establishment candidature would be effectively limited to producing an election address for the special election issue of the GMB journal. There was also concern that any such candidate would be disqualified from standing by the Executive Council.

The GMB's rules give the Executive Council the discretion to disqualify any candidate nominated for any elected officer post if it judges them to be unsuitable. It is clearly stated that:

"No member shall be eligible for nomination and election to the office of General Secretary and Treasurer, unless the Central Executive Council, on receiving his or her nomination, is satisfied that he or she is capable of discharging efficiently the duties of the office. Only candidates who have satisfied the Central Executive Council as to their fitness and qualifications shall be nominated.<sup>47</sup>



The "General Worker's" acerbic comment on this was that

"if the founder of the Gasworkers' Union, Will Thorne, had been faced with the CEC in 1889 he would never have cleared the first hurdle to become the first Gen. Sec. because at the time he was a Marxist, unable to read or write and a member of the Social Democratic Federation."48

This rule was, in fact, enforced by the Executive Council who rejected the nominations of five candidates on these grounds. On appeal, however, they were allowed to stand and it appears that this was due to the disquiet this caused among certain sections of the membership and the fact that the three major contenders were quite prepared to accept these other candidates. This was different to Basnett's election twelve years before when the only candidates allowed were either regional secretaries or, in Basnett's case, a national officer.

The election of the general secretary is no easy contest; the GMB has no automatic successor. It does appear, however, in the modern GMB that national officer candidates are better placed in this contest than regional secretary candidates. They can draw support from most regions, while regional secretaries' support tends to be confined to their own area. In the last two contests the impact of regional secretary candidates has been effectively to reduce the number of regions participating in the election. In the 1985 election Burlison, the Northern regional candidate, polled only a few thousand votes more than his regional membership, while, in the 1973 election the field comprised Basnett and five

regional secretaries, all of whom polled few more than their regional membership. At least two of these regional secretaries admit now that <sup>2-</sup> they were wrong to let their name go forward and one stated that they had given Basnett "a free run." Despite this, as Table 3.3 shows, the 1973 election was far closer than the 1985 election.

Table 3.3

General Secretary Elections 1973 and 1985

1985

Edmonds, John	411,875	58.4
Burlison, Tom	148,584	21.0
Warburton, David	121,839	17.3
Others	23,199	3.3
Majority	<u>263,291</u>	<u>37.4</u>

1973

Basnett, David	208,025	29.1
Donnet, Alex	146,421	20.5
Gladwin, Derek	132,840	18.6
Eccles, Jack	102,410	14.3
Mason, Jim	70,989	9.9
Unwin, Cyril	54,414	7.6
Majority	<u>61,604</u>	<u>8.6</u>

SOURCE: Report of Fifty-Ninth Congress, 1974, p28.  
GMB Journal October 1985.

Tom Williamson, the general secretary from 1946 to 1961, was also a national officer,<sup>49</sup> but his successor, Jack Cooper, although previously a national officer, was a regional

secretary. He was also the union's chairman, and had been so for ten years, and, therefore, had a formidable triple power base in the election. While it was common in the past for a regional secretary to become the union's chairman, in recent times the post has been held by lay members, thereby removing from regional secretaries an opportunity to get themselves more widely known in the union.

By retiring early Basnett ensured that the GMB would not be caught by the balloting provisions of the 1984 trade union act and could elect its new general secretary in the traditional manner. At the 1985 Congress, Basnett, laying down the guidelines for the election, informed members of the Executive Council's decision that voting was to be by show of hands. He also told Congress: "the system we have is one our members chose. It involves our activists - and the election takes place where it should do: at the branch."<sup>50</sup> Since the branch block vote sytem was established prior to the union's formative amalgamation in 1924, however, the claim that the system has been chosen by the members was rather specious.

Furthermore, while evincing an activist participatory model of democracy, in preference to the postal ballot systems favoured by unions such as the AEU and EETPU which do not require this, the case is still not made for the branch block vote system instead of the individual count method favoured by the TGWU and ASTMS.<sup>51</sup> In the GMB, at least,<sup>52</sup> with its widely varying branch structure, the branch block vote system



gives, as the next two chapters show in detail, a disproportionate influence in elections to the often small number of members attending meetings of large general branches, which makes it indefensible as an electoral system.

The probability of Edmonds' electoral success was evident at an early stage. Of the three main candidates Edmonds received by far the best ovation at Congress. More substantially, however, the branch nomination process in the GMB is a reliable indicator of the final result as the union operates the branch block vote system. Edmonds, by securing 547 nominations to Burlison's 289 and Warburton's 89, clearly established himself as the front-runner early in the contest.<sup>53</sup> His support was in every region apart from the Northern region and Lancashire, which made very few nominations, but it was particularly strong in the Southern region and in Liverpool. Burlison received only 18 nominations from outside his own region, while nearly half of Warburton's nominations came from the Scottish and Birmingham regions. Nominations, however, give no indication of branch size, which is the crucial factor in actual voting, and the campaign was hard-fought by all sides.

All three major candidates ran well-organised campaigns with Edmonds, in particular, developing a formidable electoral machine built around key activists and officers who supported him. A great deal of canvassing took place behind the scenes. One Congress delegate told how he had breakfast,

lunch and tea with the three different candidates in the same day. In the three regions studied, the Northern regional officers and key lay members, not surprisingly, campaigned solidly for their regional secretary, but activity was high in the other regions, strongly to the benefit of Edmonds in the Liverpool region and less obviously so in Birmingham. Perceptions of the election were diverse. It was widely felt amongst senior campaigners in the Northern region that Burlison had "been stabbed in the back" as he had been promised the support of the Scottish region which had failed to materialise and led other supporters to change candidates in mid-stream. The highly charged campaign atmosphere produced other claims and accusations and counter-accusations that are a familiar and inevitable part of the electoral process, but should form no part of objective academic analysis. What is important to recognise from this, however, is the role that canvassing played in helping to inform members of the choices available and encourage membership participation in the branch election meetings that took place.

Edmonds' reputation as a negotiator and his spread of industrial experience, having served as a national officer for local government, the public services and the electricity and gas industries, along with the support provided by key members of his electoral machine, were the major factors in his election. In comparison, Warburton had serviced a much smaller membership, representing the chemical, glass and



rubber workers since 1973, and Burlison had no national base other than his seat on the Executive Council.

2-

Although the GMB's election to choose Basnett's successor was distinctive, compared with the other unions that had elected or were just about to elect general secretaries, in that it was not contested exclusively, or even primarily, on political grounds, perceived political differences, nevertheless, did have some impact on the final outcome. Political categorisation is a subjective and sensitive issue. All three main candidates saw themselves as candidates of the centre and were strong supporters of Kinnock. They were not, however, all perceived in this way by the membership. Of the three, Warburton had the highest political profile and a reputation as a "right-wing fixer"<sup>54</sup> in Labour party circles. He was also known to have organised Denis Healey's campaign for the deputy leadership. Outside the Northern region, Burlison was perceived, unfairly, as being the heir to the tradition of the regional barons. In contrast, Edmonds had no political pedigree as such, but was known to respect and to have worked closely with David Blunkett and other left-wing council leaders on campaigns against rate-capping and abolition of the metropolitan counties. It was Edmonds, therefore, more than the others, that appeared as the candidate for change in the union.

These political differences were recognised at an early stage by left-wing elements in the GMB. Aware that the choice



would probably be between Edmonds and Warburton the editorial in the "General Worker" following Basnett's resignation warned:

"It is clear that certain National Industrial Officers will be standing and members in some of the industries covered by these officers might well vote in such a way as to retain 'their' N.I.O. This could be a disastrous tactic which could well open the door to the election of some right-wing candidate."<sup>55</sup>

The limited organised left-wing factional activity that existed in the GMB, therefore, was used, unenthusiastically, to support Edmonds and was an additional, though minor, factor encouraging membership participation in the election. More important was Edmond's image as the candidate most likely to favour change.

### Conclusion

The GMB's rules governing the union's national political system, the framework within which national policy is determined, vest Congress with "supreme authority" over the general secretary and Executive Council. They also, however, stipulate that the latter is responsible for the government of the union and the conduct of trade disputes<sup>56</sup> and this potential conflict in roles is, in practice, resolved in favour of the Executive.

As has been noted elsewhere,<sup>57</sup> this is not exceptional, but

the GMB's Congress appears more docile than most. It is relatively small in size: its membership basis is half that of the TGWU, and the NCU has roughly three times as many delegates although it has only approximately one sixth of the GMB's membership. Delegates are representatives of regions not branches and are accountable to no-one but their own delegation. This forms the region's stance on policy matters and gives very little scope for the expression of alternative views at Congress which is primarily structured to hear regional views. Resolutions from branches are submitted to a preliminary Congress agenda, but before Congress is held the regional delegation meets to decide whether they should be supported or withdrawn. The views of the regional secretary, the Executive Council and the third of the region's officers attending Congress are all expressed at this point and can be influential. Regional delegations may allow one of their number to move a resolution without regional support, but they are not compelled to do so.

It is difficult, therefore, for controversial resolutions to get on the final Congress agenda. Even if they do so, however, there is no guarantee that they will be debated. The Congress standing orders committee has wide powers to composite motions, not timetable them for discussion, or declare them out of order. In this it bears resemblance to the Labour's conference arrangements committee, not surprisingly since the GMB's Southern regional secretary has been chairman of the latter for a decade, and has a similar



capacity, when required, for manipulating the Congress agenda that has been recognised at Labour party conference.<sup>20</sup> The practice of the standing orders committee has been to declare out of order any resolution which can be referred to national industrial conferences or relates to joint industrial council matters, which in effect, has further limited Congress to the discussion of non-bargaining issues.

In the Cooper era, membership participation in the GMB's national political system was principally limited to this unsatisfactory participation at Congress and to the lay members indirectly elected, from regional councils, to the union's general council, where they were in a bare majority, and to the more important national executive, where they only had parity of representation with the regional secretaries. Membership participation was extended under Basnett, notably by the 1975 reform proposals. The role of industrial conferences was strengthened to extend membership participation in bargaining issues and the national executive structure was replaced with a single Executive Council with a higher proportion of lay members than before. Industrial conferences, as Chapter 6 shows in more detail, were formalised and further extended in 1981. Attempts were also made to reform the union's organisation to increase women's participation, leading to the 1987 Congress agreeing to reserve seats for women on the Executive.

It is easy to criticise the extent to which these



organisational reforms have improved membership participation,<sup>58</sup> but it is important to recognise the constraints imposed on the GMB's general secretary by the autonomy it gives to its regions. To effect these limited reforms required adroit brokerage on Basnett's part. As a comparative study of a number of unions noted, the general secretary of the GMB is in a weaker position than his counterpart in the TGWU or ASTMS since in the GMB:

"government at the national level is therefore mainly dependent on one major and a number of 'mini-general secretaries.' The major figure is the general secretary and the mini-generals are the regional secretaries... Power is not concentrated nationally as in the TGWU or ASTMS, but it is still spread over individuals rather than factions or parties. The general secretary's job is thus primarily one of balancing the small number of regional interests rather than unifying a large number of fragmented, non-factionalized, and hence relatively powerless interests of the TGWU and ASTMS."<sup>59</sup>

Basnett's position, initially, was further weakened by the narrowness of his election. Securing 29 per cent of the votes cast limited not the validity but the importance of the claim that he had been elected on a "reform ticket" and necessitated the careful construction of alliances and exploitation of grievances to get the 1975 proposals passed. This task became only marginally easier as his standing in the GMB and the wider union movement was enhanced.

Integral to Basnett's brokerage role was his utilisation of membership pressure for reform. Executive Council members could hardly object to asking the membership for their views on proposed organisational changes and, by instituting

consultative procedures, Basnett was not only able to open up policy making on these issues in a limited manner, but, more importantly, he was able to use membership opinion as a lever to pass reforms through the Executive. Assisting this was the lack of any significant organised political factional activity which might challenge his position.

The organisational changes during the Basnett era, and the manner in which they occurred, reflected the different values of Cooper and Basnett, which, in turn, influenced union attitudes, as Basnett, like his predecessor, stamped his personality on the union. Basnett's centrist political views and consensual approach to issues were totally different to Cooper's right-wing politics, and the authoritarian, touching on the militaristic, way that he chose to run the union. While Basnett's more democratic attitudes and opposition to "business unionism" set the tone for the replacement of retiring national officials with officers who had less authoritarian attitudes and altered the ethos of Congress, his capacity to make more fundamental changes was again limited by the regionalism of the GMB's structures. Regions have varied widely in the degree to which they have moved away from business unionism and encouraged membership participation.

There is also wide variation in regional political activity and organisation. The regional response to Basnett's initiatives at a national level to build closer



links and become more active in the trade union movement and the Labour party has been disparate. The Northern region is politically organised and solidaristic; Liverpool, not officially organised but radical and factional; and the Birmingham region unorganised and politically apathetic. Regional autonomy is of less relevance in the sphere of policy formulation on political issues, however, where the GMB gives great autonomy to its general secretary. Congress is the final arbiter of policy, but the general secretary, as the head of the union, is expected to respond to issues as they arise. The broad political consensus and lack of factionalism within the Executive, therefore, places the general secretary in a strong position to commit the union to certain political courses of action. This discretion was used by Basnett on such issues as the formulation of Labour's 1983 economic policy, where his views were agreed by the TUC-Labour party liaison committee and then approved by Congress; and on political strategy, where he was responsible for leading the TUC in and out of NEDC over the GCHQ affair.

Basnett's contribution to extending membership participation in decision-making in the GMB has been generally recognised in the union, even by left-wing elements who would not normally be associated with giving credit to union leadership's. Their view was:

"while the Broad Left is critical of just how democratic the GMB really is, we acknowledge that there have been some reforms since Pilkingtons."<sup>40</sup>



This extremely limited factional activity was used to support Edmonds in the GMB's election of Basnett's successor. The election was, however, different from the TGWU and AEU leadership elections which preceded it and succeeded it respectively, in that it was not essentially a political contest. The campaign groupings which emerged to support the candidates, nevertheless, acted like factions in many respects. They provided information and canvassed members, informing debate and encouraging membership participation.

The scale of Edmonds' victory puts him in a stronger initial position in the GMB than his predecessor as he clearly has majority backing within the union. Decision-making at national level in the GMB will, however, still depend on balancing the interests of the regions and of the union's influential lay members. It is these interests which are examined in the following regional studies.

This chapter has stressed both the increase in membership participation that has occurred in the union at national level over the past decade and the influence that Basnett had in promoting change in the GMB. This is not contradictory. As has been perceptively noted:

"trade union leaders must lead or they are a failure. By and large they cannot get their own way by commands, orders or coercion. They are not without power and have to be ready to use it on occasions. If they are good, they certainly have a strong personal influence on policy decision. Only a very naive view of democracy sees it as incompatible with strong leadership."<sup>41</sup>

MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION AND BRANCH STRUCTURE

2

The primary focus of industrial relations research over the last twenty five years has been the workplace. While this has rectified a serious omission in the literature, it has become an almost obsessive preoccupation for many practitioners. In the field of trade union democracy this overemphasis has led many studies to completely ignore the arrangements, rules and procedures that determine the structure which regulates the internal government of trade unions. It has also meant that research at the micro-analytical level into the activities and decision-making processes of individual union branches has been concerned almost exclusively with workplace branches and completely neglected general branches as an area of study.

Certainly the growth in workplace bargaining, noted by Donovan and more recent studies,<sup>1</sup> has necessitated a reassessment and refinement of the approach taken to the analysis of democracy in trade unions, but it is simplistic to see it as the "key" to trade union democracy<sup>2</sup> and wrong to conclude that establishing a workplace branch system is all that is required to make a trade union democratic.<sup>3</sup> As Chapter One argued the decentralisation of decision-making on bargaining issues is only part of the framework of trade union democracy: the other part is the way that unions determine their policy on non-bargaining issues. Moreover,



equally important to the level of decision-making is the union's horizontal dispersion - the number of people involved in making decisions at that level. This is particularly crucial in general unions whose occupational and industrial heterogeneity presents special problems<sup>4</sup> and, at the membership level, it is especially important in large general branches which have different democratic problems to company or one industry branches and require different organisational solutions.

This chapter compares patterns of membership growth and decline in three of the GMB's regions. It examines how these regions have chosen to organise their members into branches; describes the strong central tendencies encouraging the growth of large general branches; and analyses how each region has reacted to these tendencies. It assesses the implications of this for membership participation and discusses regional variations in membership characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Apart from looking at the horizontal dispersion of power at branch level on bargaining issues, however, it also provides, the necessary organisational core for the study of regional electoral processes and of the workplace in the two subsequent chapters.

### Regional variations in membership growth and decline

The academic literature on the dimensions and determinants of union growth is extensive, complex and involves a substantial



amount of quantitative analysis. The facts are not seriously in dispute: in the post-war years, three periods can be identified. First, between 1949 and 1968, the level of unionisation as a percentage of potential union membership in the UK declined very slightly but remained roughly stable. Second, between 1969 and 1979, it increased dramatically, by 13.2% for manual workers and by 11.4% for white collar workers. In the third period, 1980-86, the trade union movement lost 1.3 million workers, almost 40% of the number it gained during 1969 - 1979 in the first two years.<sup>6</sup>

A number of different theories have emerged which purport to explain these facts<sup>7</sup> and the debate has centred around two camps: those who argue that socio-economic forces are the primary determinant of aggregate union growth<sup>8</sup> and those who stress the importance of union leadership, making selective recruitment efforts in areas of non-unionism, as a major determinant of aggregate union growth.<sup>9</sup> But since this debate is about aggregate union growth, rather than about the growth of individual trade unions, it is not of direct relevance to this study - indeed even those who argue for the primacy of socio-economic forces accept that union leadership and policies can have a significant impact on the membership levels of individual unions.<sup>10</sup> What is relevant from this debate is the fact that just over two-thirds of total union growth during the 1969-79 period was amongst white collar workers - not traditionally an area of recruitment for the GMWU; and the distinction that has been made between

"natural" and "merger" growth.<sup>11</sup>

The inability of the GMB to find suitable merger partners during the 1960s and 1970s limited its growth potential but the union also found difficulty in attracting new members at a time when other unions were achieving a substantial natural growth in membership.<sup>12</sup> In the "golden age" of union recruitment between 1969 and 1979, although the GMWU's membership rose steadily, it lost ground in comparison with its main rivals whose membership soared during this period.

This problem was not lost on either the union's leadership, officers or members. The GMB's poor recruitment performance was a frequent topic of debate at Congress throughout the 1970's. The need to compete organisationally in the recruitment field with NUPE and TGWU produced the belated introduction of the non-manual section MATSA in 1972 and was the principal reason for the introduction of the district officer grade in 1974. In addition, one of the reasons for the GMWU's introduction of industrial conferences in 1969 was to make the union more attractive to potential members whose alternative was to join the TGWU with its clearly defined trade group representational structure.

Despite these organisational changes the recruitment and retention performance of the different regions has varied greatly. The next three sections examine the reasons for differences in membership growth and decline in three



regions.

## The Birmingham and West Midlands Region

The Birmingham region organises workers over a remarkably large area. Its boundaries have not changed significantly since the 1936 reorganisation. In the north it extends as far as Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke; to the west it reaches the very borders of Wales, covering Shrewsbury and Hereford; its southern boundary runs through Gloucester, Stroud, Cirencester and Oxford, where it runs north; it includes Northampton as its easternmost outpost before returning to Stoke via Rugby, Nuneaton and Burton.

Although the region covers such a wide area the bulk of its membership is concentrated in and around Birmingham and reflects the traditional heavy engineering bias of the area: the Birmingham region has a higher proportion of its members in the engineering industry than any of the other ten GMB regions. It does not, however, have as many members in the engineering industry as the AUEW; nor is it, unlike the Liverpool and Northern regions, the major union in local government - that position is occupied by NUPE which is in a large part due to the organising ability of Alan Fisher<sup>12</sup> who was a NUPE official for the Birmingham region before he became their general secretary.

Like the GMB nationally, the region's total membership



remained virtually static in the twenty years following the Second World War, only beginning to rise after 1965 when trade union membership was <sup>2-</sup>growing rapidly in almost every union. The total membership figures for the years 1970 to 1985 are given in Table 4.1. According to union rules only members whose contributions are less than six weeks in arrears are "in benefit" and consequently the region's financial membership has been approximately 2,000 less than its total membership throughout this period.

Table 4.1

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Total membership at 31 December; proportion of members paying check-off; and the number of women members for the period 1970 - 1985.

Year	Total Membership	Paying Check-off	Women Members
1985	67,309	88.3%	15,083
1984	70,320	88.5%	15,171
1983	72,968	88.4%	16,074
1982	79,487	84.9%	21,580
1981	89,172	86.3%	26,153
1980	97,174	87.4%	27,964
1979	106,340	88.6%	29,810
1978	109,820	87.2%	33,210
1977	108,108	85.9%	31,746
1976	104,039	82.9%	31,950
1975	98,000	na	na
1974	100,000	na	na
1973	95,162	70.0%	28,163
1972	93,243	53.6%	25,239
1971	91,000	44.0%	22,500
1970	91,000	na	na

SOURCE: GMWU Annual Congress Reports

The figures show quite clearly both the growth in membership

that took place up to 1979 and the dramatic decline since then. During the period 1968-73 total membership grew by 37.3 per cent while women membership grew slightly faster, rising by 41.3 per cent, reflecting national statistics which showed an increasing proportion of women in the country's total workforce.

More than two thirds of the growth in membership took place in the first half of this period with recruitment rising during the latter half by only 9.8 per cent to its post-war peak of 109,820 in 1978. Since that time membership has declined dramatically as the West Midlands and, in particular, its manufacturing industry has borne the brunt of the economic recession since 1979. Registered unemployment in the West Midlands rose by 187.4% between 1979 and 1984; from 5.2 per cent to 15.3 per cent of the region's workforce.<sup>13</sup> The GMB's Birmingham and West Midlands region with its heavy preponderance of members in the engineering industry has suffered badly as a result. It lost 36% of its total membership, nearly forty thousand members, during this period. Despite an active attempt to keep members on its books, by charging only 2p per week for the unemployed, the regional secretary admitted that for every 1,000 jobs lost the union has lost 950 members and "everything in the region is geared up to saving money."

The recruitment and retention performance of the Birmingham region during the 1970s was almost an exact microcosm of the

union's national performance; but, since 1979, the haemorrhage of membership that has taken place in the region has been far worse than that suffered by any other region. Despite the formation of a MATSA section and the introduction of the district officer in the region, whose role was inter alia to step up recruitment, the Birmingham region still compared badly with the recruitment and retention performance in the closest equivalent regions of two of its main rivals between 1968 and 1984 as Table 4.2 shows.

Table 4.2

**BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION**

Changes in membership: GMWU Birmingham and West Midlands Region; NALGO West Midlands District; NUPE West Midlands Division.

Year	GMWU	NALGO	NUPE
1968	80,013	35,967	28,257
1978	109,820	72,197	67,842
change	+37.3	+100.7	+140.1
1978	109,820	72,197	67,842
1984	70,320	75,826	63,269
% change	-36.0	+5.0	-6.7

SOURCE: GMW Annual Congress Reports  
NALGO Audited Membership Returns  
NUPE Organisation Department

Trade Union membership in the United Kingdom grew by 28.5% between 1968 and 1978.<sup>14</sup> Compared with this the Birmingham region's growth of 37.3% looks more than respectable, but



NALGO membership in the West Midlands doubled during this period and membership of NUPE rose by a massive 140.1%. Similarly, between 1978 and 1984, while GMB membership declined by 36%, NUPE membership declined by only 6.7% and membership of NALGO was 5% higher in 1984 than in 1978.

Such comparisons can never be exact for a number of reasons: regional boundaries vary between unions; different unions recruit in different occupations and industrial sectors; and because of the problems in distinguishing between natural and merger growth. It is this latter reason which makes comparisons with the TGWU's No.5 [Midlands] region impractical (the TGWU had twenty four amalgamations or transfers of engagements between 1968 and 1982) and it also precludes comparisons with the AEU. It does not, however, apply to NALGO or NUPE but NALGO, the largest white collar union in Britain, recruits mainly in different areas to the GMB and benefitted from the disproportionate growth in unionisation of white-collar workers in the 1970s and the relative stability of local government employment since 1979. For this reason comparisons with NALGO can only be indicative, showing the failure of the GMB's MATSA section to make any significant inroads into the recruitment of white-collar members.

The better comparison is with NUPE which is in open competition with GMBATU in Local Government, large areas of the National Health Service, and the Water industry although

admittedly not in the private sector which has seen the worst of the recession. Despite these caveats there can be no doubt that on the figures the recruitment and retention performance of the GMB in the West Midlands period during the 1968 to 1984 period was significantly worse than its major competitors.

It would be wrong to blame the region's leadership for its relative failure to recruit and retain members compared with other unions. The inability of the GMB nationally to attract merger partners and to sufficiently update its organisation to compete in the recruitment field with rival unions must be major explanatory variables. Nevertheless, regions do have some discretion over their actions and the research found that, in four ways, all of them avoidable to a greater or lesser extent, the region has made its task more difficult.

First, it was clear that there was no discernable recruitment strategy within the region. During the period of rapid membership growth between 1968 and 1978, regional officers who recruited new members could virtually pick which branch administrative officers or full-time lay branch secretaries they gave their members to and, not surprisingly, they tended to distribute this largesse more on the grounds of personal friendship rather than economic or geographical rationality. As a result many of the larger branches have pockets of workers in factories dotted all over the region: the Fort Dunlop and Erdington branch includes workers on the borders



of Wales, thermal insulation workers on contract in Edinburgh, Northern Ireland and Abu Dhabi, as well as workers in a number of other towns in and around the region. While, since 1979, apart from allowing branches to spend money to attract new members and some attempt to recruit people on Youth Training Schemes, there appears to be no significant regional recruitment initiatives.

Second, allied to this lack of a recruitment strategy, is an absence of any form of recruitment organisation. The region has a recruitment officer, but the post is regarded as being junior, having been filled in the past by appointed officers, who, when they had proved themselves competent, went on to a "proper" negotiating job. Indicative of the importance attached to recruitment was the fact that interviews revealed that the recruitment officer is expected to take over the casework of regional officers who are ill or on holiday and, consequently, gets to spend little time on recruitment.

The third way in which the region has made its recruitment task more difficult is through the attitudes of some of its officers. Many officers, and GMB officers are not the only union officers guilty of this, still perceive their role as being primarily, or in extreme cases exclusively, involved in negotiating with employers, rather than as encompassing a wide range of organising duties, of which recruitment is one.<sup>15</sup>



Lastly, the region's branch structure is also an impediment to recruitment. More than one official mentioned that many employees wishing to join <sup>the</sup> trade unions nowadays tended to "shop around" and, when they did so chose to join either NUPE, with its strong workplace branch system, or the TGWU, with its trade group structure, in preference to the GMB.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Birmingham and West Midlands region did badly in external comparison with other trade unions, its performance in internal comparisons with other GMB regions is perhaps more relevant, and the Liverpool and Northern regions will now be examined so that comparisons can be made.

#### The Liverpool, North Wales and Northern Ireland Region

As its full title implies, the Liverpool region covers an enormously varied area. From the regional headquarters, situated in Liverpool just off the M62 near to Toxteth, the region extends northwards as far as Southport and eastwards to include St Helens, Runcorn and Widnes. It then includes half of Cheshire, extending down to near Stoke-on-Trent before turning westwards to include all of North Wales from Wrexham to Porthmadog and then, finally, Northern Ireland.

In 1983 it was calculated that 73 per cent of its membership was in England; 21 per cent in Northern Ireland and only 6 per cent in North Wales. Two thirds of the region's membership comes from the Greater Merseyside area, the

largest part of it being in local government, where the GMB is the dominant union in the North West, but there is also a substantial membership in the food industry, at Nabisco and Associated Biscuits, and in the chemicals and glass industries at ICI and at Pilkingtons.

The pattern of membership growth and decline in the region is summarised in Table 4.3 and shows certain similarities, but also some key differences with the other regions. Membership in the Liverpool region, like the Birmingham and Northern regions, reached its peak in 1978-79, reflecting the economic trends prevailing in the U.K. at that time. But while the Birmingham region grew by 37.3 per cent between 1968 and 1978, with over two-thirds of its growth occurring in the first half of this period, the Liverpool region grew by 51.3 per cent with a substantial amount of this growth occurring in the latter period.

Registered unemployment in the North West Department of Employment standard region increased from 6.5 per cent to 15.9 per cent of the workforce between 1978 and 1984, a rise of 136.8%<sup>17</sup> - less than the 187.4% rise that occurred in the West Midlands during the same period, but unemployment in the Liverpool area itself rose by a much faster rate making the regions roughly comparable in this respect. Despite this, as Table 4.4 shows, the GMB's Liverpool region lost only 28.7% of its members compared with the Birmingham region's 36%

Table 4.3

LIVERPOOL REGION

2-  
Total Membership at 31 December; proportion of members paying check-off; and the number of women members for the period 1970 - 1985.

Year	Total Membership	Paying Check-off	Women Members
1985	71,667	83.9%	24,545
1984	73,780	84.1%	25,527
1983*	76,678	84.1%	26,104
1982	71,437	91.1%	28,187
1981	75,926	91.5%	28,523
1980	81,813	91.8%	30,010
1979	90,980	91.7%	34,289
1978	90,953	91.9%	33,694
1977	90,231	90.2%	34,242
1976	87,486	89.4%	33,905
1975	78,936	87.4%	30,357
1974	na	na	na
1973	na	na	na
1972	71,844	72.0%	na
1971	71,149	68.2%	na
1970	72,006	58.3%	na

SOURCE: GMWU Annual Congress Reports

\* The figures from 1983 include BMS section members: 9,290 in 1983.

membership loss figure, though again it can be seen that compared with other unions, particularly NUPE, the GMB did not do very well.

Analytically, explanations for the variation in membership growth and decline between the Liverpool and Birmingham regions can be attributed either to the differential impact of exogenous constraints, such as the economy, political culture, industrial structure; to different regional



strategies and structures; or to some combination of these factors.

2

Table 4.4

LIVERPOOL REGION

Changes in membership: GMWU Liverpool Region; NALGO North Western and N. Wales District; NUPE North West Division.

Year	GMWU	NALGO	NUPE
1968	60,132	57,557	26,444
1978	90,953	111,155	100,274
% Change	+51.6	+93.1	+279.2
1978	90,953	111,155	100,274
1984 <sup>a</sup>	64,898	115,475	97,164
% Change	-28.6	+3.9	-3.1

SOURCE: GMWU Annual Congress Reports  
NALGO Audited Membership Returns  
NUPE Organistaion Department

<sup>a</sup> For comparative purposes the figures exclude BMS section members.

In the growth years, 1968-78, exogenous factors were relatively constant. Certainly, there was some difference in regional economic growth patterns, while the different industrial bases of the regions has already been noted. Also a number of people in the Liverpool region have argued that Liverpool has always been more politically aware than other cities and its inhabitants more receptive to the values associated with trade unionism. Nevertheless, these factors

appear to have very limited explanatory power in understanding the overall variation in membership recruitment during this period and they offer no explanation why membership growth in Liverpool should be concentrated in the latter half of the period when more than two-thirds of the Birmingham region's growth occurred during the first half.

More compelling in both these respects are regional explanations, however, three of the four factors found to be impeding membership recruitment in the Birmingham region are also to be found in its Liverpool neighbour. Research found a similar lack of any defined recruitment strategy or recruitment organisation (though attempts were made to concentrate efforts in the public sector) and a similar narrow perception of their role by many regional officers. While, the ability of the Liverpool region to recruit more easily in the public sector than the Birmingham region, because of its historically dominant position, is one of the explanations for its better recruitment record, differences in the regions' branch structures, the fourth factor in the Birmingham study, are an important explanatory variable.

As Chapter 2 noted, the Pilkington's dispute had a catalytic affect on the national union, heralding changes in organisation and attitudes. But nowhere were its effects more fully felt than in the region in which the dispute was located. From being a region dominated by a small number of large general branches, the region quickly developed a

network of workplace branches. Following the report of the Donnet Committee into Pilkingtons, which recommended the splitting up of the massive <sup>2</sup> St Helen's branch and the formation of eight new branches,<sup>18</sup> this practice was extended to other branches in the region.

The demand for these changes came from the membership at the grass-roots and was translated into a majority on the regional council and committee in favour of establishing what was perceived as being a more relevant workplace branch structure. Indicative of this process, which was confirmed in a number of interviews, is the evidence that between 1976 and 1978 a total of 150 new branches were formed in the Liverpool region compared with 40 in the Northern and only 27 in the Birmingham regions.<sup>19</sup> It was this new political ethos and the willingness to form new branches in areas of new recruitment, rather than allocate new members to existing branches, which distinguishes the growth record of the Liverpool region from the Birmingham region in the period up to 1978. Following the after-shock of the dispute, as a result of the post-Pilkington's changes, potential new members saw the GMW in Liverpool as offering them a structure of workplace representation and officer support that, at least, matched if not bettered what other trade unions in the area could offer and their recruitment to the ranks boosted membership in Liverpool at a time when membership in the Birmingham region was growing only slightly. Important also in this process of change was the growing recognition of shop



stewards by the new regional leadership and their utilisation as recruiting agents.

2-

Explanations for the Liverpool region's better performance in recruiting and retaining members since 1978 are perhaps more clear-cut. Although the region's branch structure is still a positive factor, a large part of the reason for the Liverpool regions eight per cent higher retention figure, given a very similar level of commitment to recruitment and roughly comparable increases in overall unemployment levels, is the different industrial composition of the two regions. Job losses in the local government sector and other areas of the public sector, where the GMWU in Liverpool is particularly strong, have been less severe than the losses suffered by manufacturing industry, which makes up the bulk of the GMW's Birmingham and West Midlands membership. Membership retention figures for the Northern region, however, show more fundamentally different variations which cannot be explained in this manner.

### The Northern Region

The GMB has more than twice as many members than any other union in the North. It covers the five northernmost English counties: Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Cleveland and Co. Durham. Nowhere is the description general union more apt than it is in the North. The Northern region represents workers in virtually every type of industry. From

the two thousand employees at the Sellafield Nuclear plant in Cumbria to home helps in every local authority; from thousands of shipyard workers on the rivers Tyne and Wear through to the ancillary and nursing staff who run the region's hospitals.

Although the region covers such a large geographical area and has an occupationally diverse membership, the bulk of its membership is to be found in the Tyne and Wear conurbation. Officers estimate that nearly three-quarters of the union's membership is located in this area with the GMB occupying a dominant position in local government and in the shipbuilding and ship-repairing industry. It is these strengths which have enabled the Northern region to be consistently the largest of all the GMB regions as the membership figures summarised in Table 4.5 indicate.

Since 1970 the Northern region has had well over 100,000 members, though this figure has been sustained in recent years only because of the amalgamation with the ASBBSBW. The GMB's recruitment and retention performance in the North, as Table 4.6 demonstrates, compares badly with the nearest equivalent NUPE and NALGO areas,<sup>20</sup> but it also shows quite substantial differences from the GMB's Birmingham and Liverpool regions.

Table 4.5

NORTHERN REGION

Total membership at 31 December; proportion of members paying check-off; and the number of women members for the period 1970 - 1985.

Year	Total Membership	Paying Check-off	Women Members
1985	118,348	72.0%	35,972
1984	121,523	72.9%	37,010
1983*	123,636	96.4%	37,357
1982	104,441	82.5%	38,214
1981	109,448	82.7%	39,275
1980	113,742	75.2%	39,982
1979	120,033	83.8%	42,419
1978	120,045	89.5%	41,712
1977	116,071	86.7%	29,790
1976	114,907	87.7%	40,507
1975	112,444	84.0%	na
1974	114,474	82.0%	na
1973	108,255	78.5%	34,715
1972	105,849	72.8%	na
1971	104,745	61.0%	na
1970	109,229	na	31,361

SOURCE: GMWU Annual Congress Reports

\* The figures from 1983 include BMS section members, 23,655 in 1983.

Membership growth in the Northern region during the 1968-78 period, at 23.7 per cent, was nearly 14 per cent lower than the Birmingham region and less than half that of the Liverpool region. Since that time unemployment in the North has increased by ten percentage points from 8.3 per cent in 1979 to 19.3 per cent in 1984<sup>21</sup> - an increase of just over one hundred per cent, less than the increase suffered by either the Liverpool or Birmingham regions, though officers in the Northern region rightly point out that the level of



Table 4.6

2-NORTHERN REGION

Changes in membership GMWU Northern Region; NALGO North Eastern and Yorkshire & Humberside districts; NUPE Northern Division.

Year	GMWU	NALGO	NUPE
1968	97,026	51,202	20,875
1978	120,045	109,320	47,517
% Change	+23.7	+113.5	+127.6
1978	120,045	109,320	47,517
1984 <sup>a</sup>	98,368	112,715	45,748
% Change	-18.1	+3.1	- 3.7

SOURCE: GMWU Annual Congress Reports  
NALGO Audited Membership Returns  
NUPE Organisation Department

<sup>a</sup> For comparative purpose the figures exclude BMS section members.

unemployment is higher in aggregate terms than any other region; it is especially high on Tyneside where the bulk of the union's membership is concentrated. But even allowing for some differences in unemployment rates, the Northern region appears to have done particularly well to lose over ten per cent fewer members than the Liverpool region, and half the percentage loss of the Birmingham region.

On the face of it, the Northern region's recruitment and retention performance between 1968 and 1978 looks distinctly uninspiring. To some extent, however, this is misleading

since the region had experienced rapid growth earlier. A study of change in a number of trade unions since 1960 found that in the GMB "unlike other regions, which either stagnated or came into life in the latter part of the period examined, the Scottish and Northern regions successfully pursued growth policies from the early 1960s."<sup>22</sup> It argued that this was due to the Scottish and Northern regional secretaries using their power to break away from the union's passive approach to membership recruitment and hostility to industrial action; to involve shop stewards in negotiations; introduce changes in branch structure; and to treat recruitment as a regional priority and actively involve themselves with it.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Northern region's recruitment successes during 1960-68 tempered their performance in following years, when other regions still had the capacity to "catch-up" by pursuing similar policies, but the reforming zeal that brought the changes in the Northern region during the early sixties was not nearly so evident in the early to middle seventies. Regional membership grew by less than ten per cent between 1970 and 1978. There was still some attempt to break up large branches. In 1971, on the retirement of a well-known lay branch secretary and national executive member, a branch of over 4,000 members was subdivided into twelve; but, in comparison with the Liverpool region, there was no concerted attempt to create new branches. The region also slipped back into some of its old ways, becoming

identified as pro-establishment and anti-strike, and the almost dynastic public image it presented made it appear less attractive to many potential<sup>2</sup> members.

The Northern region's membership performance since 1978 confirms the ability of regional secretaries to use their discretion to significantly affect the level of recruitment. Differential unemployment rates can only explain part of the variation in membership between the three regions and the Northern region's relatively good performance owes a great deal to the work of Tom Burlison who was appointed as regional secretary in the middle of that year.

Under his leadership the region has developed an active recruitment strategy and organisation. Since 1980 there has been a recruitment team, co-ordinated by an officer from head office, and this team has developed separate county campaign teams, involving shop stewards and other local activists directly in recruitment. Recruitment has also been stressed as a priority at the three-monthly Conferences of branch representatives that have been instituted to improve communications within the union. New members have also been attracted to the union as a result of the high media profile that Burlison has developed for the union. In addition, there have been efforts to retain and recruit the unemployed as union members, with the introduction in 1982 of an advice and counselling service for the unemployed, and the union taking the lead in trade union campaigns on unemployment.



The study shows the significant discretion that regions have over their membership growth. It builds on a recent study of growth in the GMB,<sup>25</sup> which emphasised the key role of regional secretaries acting as agents of change. It adds to this by suggesting that regional lay leadership and, in exceptional circumstances, membership pressure may also act as a change agent. Further it outlines the scope for changes to facilitate growth, confirming the importance of recruitment being made a priority and involving shop stewards and local activists in the recruitment process, stressing the need for the region to present a good public image, and emphasising not only the need to break up large branches but to establish branches that are perceived as being relevant forums for potential new members.

#### Regional variations in branch structure and participation

While the region's branch structure is only one factor impacting on a region's ability to recruit and retain members, it is a major factor determining the level of democratic activity within the union. The branch structure that exists in a particular region is a function of a number of different variables, many of them inter-dependent: union history, industrial structure, the rule book and its local interpretation, membership attitudes and abilities, bargaining structure, and national and regional leadership attitudes.

As Chapter 2 noted, British trade unions, "are historical deposits and repositories <sup>of</sup> history ... every union possesses a personality of its own."<sup>26</sup> They have to be seen not only in relation to the historical development of trade unionism, but in terms of their own specific history. This is particularly true in respect of the GMWU and the evolution of its branch structure.

There have been general branches and specialised branches in the union since the earliest days of the Gasworkers. At that time trade unionism was a precarious activity and to feel more secure union members tended to organise themselves into large general or single-industry branches. With the gradual recognition and legitimation of trade unions most unions began to move away from large general branches and towards company branches. Although such a trend has been apparent in the NUGMW at certain times and in certain areas, the GMB today is distinctive in that it has a higher proportion of its members in general branches than any other major union.

The rationale typically given<sup>27</sup> for this structure is that general branches are particularly suited to rural areas, where union membership in individual companies is usually low; a branch can be centred on the main town in the area, which probably has adequate transport services to enable members to attend meetings. Specialised branches, in contrast, are best suited to industrial areas where one

company may employ enough workers to make the formation of a branch feasible. This rationale, however, cannot explain regional variations in the pattern of branch structure in the GMB.

The 1912 Congress decision to allow the establishment of full-time branch secretaries to live off the commission they received from collecting membership subscriptions,<sup>28</sup> led inexorably to the spread of general branches at the expense of specialised ones at a time when most other unions were moving in the opposite direction. Under the logic of the commission system, no ambitious branch secretary interested in increasing his own income wanted to be confined to organising members in a single factory and new members recruited from other workplaces quickly found themselves subsumed into a large general branch.

The following fifty years firmly entrenched this structure. When a full-time branch secretary retired there was no shortage of candidates to replace him and maintain the tradition. Nor did the replacement of full-time branch secretaries by branch administrative officers, which began in 1965, alter this situation. On the contrary it can be regarded as formally recognising the importance of large general branches in the union's structure. Moreover, since under the rule change a proportion of the BAO's salary was related to the size of the membership that he or she serviced, there was a similar incentive for BAO's to recruit



members regardless of where they lived or worked. Yet, despite these strong common central tendencies encouraging general branches, as the <sup>2</sup>previous section noted, branch structure has developed differently in different regions and this is described and analysed below.

### Regional variations in branch structure

The Birmingham region's membership is contained in roughly 220 branches. The average size of the branch is between 310 and 320 members and the median branch has around 180 members; both, however, give a false impression of the distribution of branch membership. Large branches dominate the region. Over half of the total membership is in branches with more than 500 members, with 39 per cent of the members being in the five per cent of branches which have over 1,000 members and which had full-time officers of the union as branch secretaries until Decision 84 came into effect. In contrast, there are a large number of small branches; over a third of all the region's branches have less than a hundred members but they account for only eight per cent of the total membership. The figures are summarised in Table 4.7 which shows the distribution of branches and membership in the region.

Large branches are not necessarily general branches. They may cover workers at only one large factory. In the Birmingham region, however, many branches which started off

as large company branches have developed into general branches. The region's largest branch, Fort Dunlop and Erdington, with nearly 6,500 members, was originally, as the

Table 4.7

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Analysis of Branch size by total number of branches and by total membership as at end of June 1984.

Branch Size	Number of Branches	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Under 50	36	17	3
51 - 100	42	20	5
101 - 250	62	30	15
251 - 500	41	20	22
501 - 1000	16	8	17
1001 - 2000	2	1	5
2001 - 3000	2	1	7
3001 - 4000	4	2	18
4001 - 5000	0	0	0
5001 - 6000	0	0	0
6001 - 7000	1	0.5	9

SOURCE: Branch Income and Expenditure Computer Print-Out Sheets for the quarter ending June 1984.

name implies, a company branch, but has now extended to cover Erdington and workers dotted all around the region and even outside it. For a long time the Banbury branch was called the North Aluminium Company Branch before changing into a general branch. Consequently, as Table 4.8 indicates only 18 per cent of the region's total membership are to be found in company branches.

Table 4.8

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Number of branches and percentage of total branches and members categorised as company, one-industry or general branches at December 1982.

Category	Number	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Company	59	26	18
One Industry	96	43	23
General	69	31	59

SOURCE: Executive Council Finance Steering Group Working Party on Branch and Workplace Administration.

The metamorphosis of large company branches into general branches in the Birmingham region can, up to 1974, be attributed almost solely to the compelling financial logic that the union's rule book exerts on lay full-time branch secretaries through the commission system. This logic depends on either greed or need for its operation and shows the fine dividing line between providing incentives to recruit new members into the union and providing a license for abuse. Greed has certainly been a factor in lay full-time secretaries of large company branches recruiting new members from totally different industries and gradually transforming their branches into general branches and, although it is understandable that branch secretaries on low incomes would want to try to better their positions, relatively wealthy lay branch secretaries and salaried branch



administrative officers have chosen to do the same, often with scant regard for whether the members they recruit can be represented effectively. 2

Qualitatively different, but producing the same end result, has been the impetus for change stemming from the desire of a full-time secretary to maintain his or her income when exogenous factors, such as rising unemployment or industrial re-location, significantly reduce the size of the company's workforce. In these circumstances it would be unreasonable not to expect the branch secretary, who had given up a previous job to work for the union, to do everything possible to recruit new members, even if this meant that the branch was changed to become a general branch. This has been a long term factor altering the region's branch structure.

While the financial logic of the commission system was reinforced in the Cooper era by the deliberate national encouragement of large general branches and their ready acceptance by the leadership in the Birmingham region, the election of Basnett as general secretary in 1973 signalled a move away from these "Lancashire methods" and gave fresh stimulus to the demands for a workplace branch structure that arose throughout the union after the Pilkingtons dispute. With the gradual replacement of BAD's as branch secretaries by district officers, who had no incentive to increase or maintain their branch size, that occurred in the Birmingham region from 1974, the region had an opportunity to make the

sort of changes in its branch structure that the national leadership was supporting.

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The regional leadership, however, struthiously failed to do so. Any pretence that the region was moving in this direction came to an abrupt halt in 1979 with the onset of the recession. As one regional official interviewed bluntly put it: "if we're moving towards workplace branches it's news to me - in fact we're doing just the opposite." The reason for this move in the opposite direction, paradoxically, since developing a workplace branch structure increased recruitment in the Liverpool region, is the financial crisis in the region that has been triggered by the loss of membership during the recession. Branches of less than eighty members are regarded as uneconomic and there has been pressure to merge smaller branches or allocate their membership to larger ones. Even greater savings were achieved by merging branches with those staffed by a district officer since they were not eligible for commission, but Decision 84 has removed this avenue for making economies.

The Liverpool region, in direct contrast to Birmingham, seized the opportunities for change that were available under the new Basnett leadership and enthusiastically responded to the demands for change emanating from the region's grass-roots. The region has roughly the same number of members as the Birmingham region, slightly less if the Boilermakers' section is excluded, and this membership is distributed into



390 branches, 360 excluding BMS branches. This means that the Liverpool region has over 75 per cent more branches than the Birmingham region covering the same membership. The average branch size is between 200 and 210, but more relevant is the median branch which has 89 members, reflecting the importance attached to establishing small branches in the region. A breakdown of branch size is given in Table 4.9 below.

Table 4.9

LIVERPOOL REGION

Analysis of branch size by total number of branches and by total membership as at end of June 1984.

Branch Size	Number of Branches	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Under 50	71	29	3
51 - 100	66	27	10
101 - 250	48	20	13
251 - 500	38	16	28
501 - 1000	15	6	22
1001 - 2000	4	2	10
2001 - 3000	1	0.5	5
3001 - 4000	1	0.5	8

SOURCE: Branch Income and Membership Sheets for the quarter ending June 1984.<sup>29</sup>

The post-Pilkingtons practice of splitting up large branches was continued throughout the 1970s and, as a result, only six branches on Merseyside have more than one thousand members. These six branches cover 23 per cent of the membership compared with the Birmingham region which has 39 per cent of its membership in branches with over a thousand members.



Moreover, unlike the Birmingham region, none of them can be classified as general branches. Three are company branches, serving the region's two large biscuit factories and the ICI chemical plant at Runcorn, and three are one-industry branches, all of these covering local authority workers in Liverpool.

As Table 4.10 shows, only 14 per cent of the region's membership is in general branches. This is the lowest of all the GMB's regions by far and in stark contrast to Birmingham which has nearly 60 per cent of its members in general branches. The region, as might be expected, also has the highest proportion of its members in company branches of all

Table 4.10

LIVERPOOL REGION

Number of branches and percentage of total branches and members categorised as company, one-industry or general branches at December 1982.

Category	Number	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Company	168	48	40
One-Industry	151	43	46
General	32	9	14

SOURCE: Executive Council Finance Steering Group  
Working Party on Branch and Workplace  
Administration.

the GMB's regions. At 40 per cent this is more than double

either the Birmingham region (18 per cent) or the union as a whole (19 per cent). In total, 86 per cent of the region's membership is in either <sup>2</sup>company or one-industry branches.

The Northern region of the GMB has evolved a branch structure that closely reflects the GMB nationally, and has much more in common with the Birmingham than the Liverpool region. The region has roughly 350 branches and the average branch size is between 350 and 360, higher than both the other regions, as is the figure for the median branch which contains about 220 members. Table 4.11 sets out the relevant figures.

Table 4.11

NORTHERN REGION

Analysis of branch size by total number of branches and by total membership as at end of June 1984.

Branch Size	Number of Branches	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Under 50	38	14	1
51 - 100	53	20	4
101 - 250	65	24	13
251 - 500	57	21	23
501 - 1000	38	14	30
1001 - 2000	14	5	20
2001 - 3000	3	1	8

SOURCE: Branch Annual Census of Membership Sheets, figures for the quarter ending June 1984.

With 28 per cent of the membership in branches with over one thousand members, the region is not as dominated by large branches as the Birmingham region, whose equivalent figure is

39 per cent, and is nearer Liverpool's 23 per cent. With only 5 per cent of its members in branches of less than one hundred members, however, the Northern region is very different to the Liverpool region which has nearly three times as many members in small branches.

The consistent rejection of very large branches by the region is evidenced by the fact that the region's largest branch had 2,372 members in the middle of 1984 and thirteen of the seventeen largest branches in the region had less than 1,500 members. Of the branches over one thousand members about half are general branches, the remainder tending to be one-industry branches, rather than company branches. Table 4.12 breaks down the figures for the whole region into these categories.

Table 4.12

NORTHERN REGION

Number of branches and percentage of total branches and members categorised as company, one-industry or general branches as at December 1982.

Category	Number	% Total Branches	% Total Membership
Company	88	30	20
One-Industry	73	25	28
General	129	45	52

SOURCE: Executive Council Finance Steering Group  
Working Party on Branch and Workplace  
Administration.



The figures show how prevalent general branches are in the region. Nearly one in every two branches is a general branch, compared with one in three for the GMWU nationally. Because of the relative absence of large general branches in the region, however, at 52 per cent, the region has one per cent less of its members in general branches than the union as a whole. With 28 per cent of its members in one-industry branches and 20 per cent in company branches it has, respectively, exactly the same proportion of members and one per cent more in these type of branches than the GMWU nationally, reflecting its striking similarity.

Having described and analysed the different branch structures that exist in the three regions, it is time to return to the possible explanations for these differences noted at the beginning of this section and to make explicit the link between branch structure and the level of membership participation in a region.

### Factors influencing branch structure

Exogenous factors need little elucidation. Industrial structure obviously has some bearing on branch structure. For instance, there is a certain logic in organising workers in the gas or water industries into one-industry branches, while workers in large manufacturing and retailing companies may be best represented in company branches. Too much,

however, can be made of this as an explanation for variations in regional branch structures. Although, *ceteris paribus*, differences in a region's industrial structure could be expected to produce differences in branch structure, other things are very rarely equal and regions have a large amount of discretion in determining their branch structure. In the Liverpool region, unlike the others, a number of large companies have more than one GMB branch within them, representing different sections of the company's workforce - Pilkingtons is the best known, but far from the only example - rather than having one large branch for the company as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

Closely related to industrial structure has been the change in the structure of bargaining that have taken place over the past thirty years and which, arguably, have a more important impact on branch structure. The increase in workplace bargaining has increased membership pressure in the union for it to develop more relevant structures of membership representation. However, again, as has been shown, that pressure, by itself, is not sufficient to produce change. Despite such pressures, and even national encouragement in the post-1974 period, the Birmingham region did little if anything to move towards a more workplace-based branch system during the 1970s, emphasising the importance of the role of regional leadership in either blocking or promoting change within its boundaries.



The importance of regional leadership in determining its branch structure is similarly evident from an examination of internal factors. Although, the history of the GMB has been distinguished by the prevalence of general branches, which give the union its distinctive character, and although this historical tendency has been reinforced through rule, by the logic of the commission system, and even positively advocated as a policy by the national leadership for much of the union's history, such is the autonomy that the GMB nationally gives to its regions that they can, if they so wish, choose to transcend these constraints and pressures and act independently to fundamentally change the branch structure of a region. A region can do this because, unlike most other trade unions, the branch structure of the GMB's regions is not laid down centrally. It is, therefore, up to regions to decide whether to change or maintain their own branch structure and not just a matter of accepting the status quo: non-decisions are equally as important as decisions.<sup>31</sup> The initiation of change in the branch structure of the Liverpool region, the partial change in the Northern region and the absence of change in the Birmingham region have already been partly examined in referring to membership growth and need not be repeated. The motivations of the change agents, however, and, indeed, the non-change agents need to be expanded on further.

The package of reforms introduced by Cunningham into the Northern region during the early 1960s was primarily aimed at



improving recruitment and establishing a new image for the union in the North. Nevertheless, in a period when trade union democracy was not a political issue, involving the membership and making the region more representative of its members, emerged as major subsidiary themes. The integration of shop stewards into the bargaining process; the introduction of changes in the method of election of the regional council and congress delegation to ensure fairer representation;<sup>32</sup> and the break up of very large branches; all had an impact on the level of democracy within the region. But, while improving democracy in the union was only a subsidiary reason behind changes in branch structure in the Northern region, it was more or less explicitly stated as a primary reason for the post-1970 branch structure reforms in the Liverpool region.

Once again, the Pilkington explosion critically influenced future events. The dispute was essentially a strike against the GMB by its own membership. Members objected to their alienation from the channels of decision-making within the union, and their demands for involvement in the collective bargaining process and the union's democratic structure<sup>33</sup> found acceptance and articulation among the new regional lay leadership which came to power. The leadership then implemented these demands on a much wider scale in a conscious attempt to democratise the region.

In contrast, the lack of any changes in branch structure in

the Birmingham region during the 1970s was wholly due to the motivation that the regional lay leadership had to maintain the status quo. Since many of them were full-time branch secretaries of large branches, the commission system gave them a strong vested interest in blocking any change which they were able to exercise successfully, in the absence of any significant pressures for change from either the regional secretary or the membership.

Two interesting points emerge from this analysis. The first, the potential for conflict between change agents - principally between the regional secretary and the regional lay leadership - will have to wait until the next chapter on regional power. The second can be raised now since it relates to branch structure. It suggests the necessity of any analysis of democracy within the GMB distinguishing between changes in branch structure which integrate the branch with the bargaining process and changes in branch structure aimed at avoiding the domination of the region by large or general branches. The first part of this distinction should be well understood by now, however, the second part implies that there may be something inherently problematic for democracy with large or general branches and this theme needs to be amplified by a brief survey of membership participation in the branch.

## Participation at branch level

Potentially, the scope for membership participation in branch activities is extraordinarily wide and can involve activities of marginal or even no relevance to trade union democracy.

For this reason it is defined narrowly in this study as the level of membership participation in branch decisions. Since participation in elections for regional and national bodies is examined elsewhere, the present focus is further confined to the ordinary decisions taken by branches as part of their function of providing the regular means of contact between the members and the higher administration of the union. In carrying out this function, the secretary of the branch, as with other trade unions, is the key channel of communication.

The branch secretary receives regular mailings from the region: regional council minutes, instructions for carrying out union decisions and a large number of circulars on a wide range of issues varying from wages and conditions to union policy on Nicaragua. The branch secretary sends the region resolutions passed by the branch, letters on claims for benefit, industrial injury, etc. and any other information that he or she thinks may be useful. In accordance with rule the branch secretary along with the chairman, auditors and a branch committee of not less than seven members, including the chairman and branch secretary, is elected every two years.<sup>34</sup>



The rule book stipulates that branches should meet quarterly, but some of the more active branches meet more frequently and some branches do not appear to meet at all. In common with other trade unions, attendance at branch meetings is normally low. This is nothing new, a PEP study of six unions forty years ago found that in votes at branch meetings "percentages vary from 2 to more than 30 per cent, but are mainly between 15 and 25 per cent."<sup>35</sup> Since that time many of the changes that have taken place in British society have made membership attendance at branch meetings even less likely: post-war full employment, the "butskellite" consensus on major political, economic and industrial issues, and the spread of television and other competing forms of entertainment have all provided disincentives or counter-attractions to attendance at branch meetings;<sup>36</sup> it is widely assumed that branch meetings are not particularly riveting occasions anyway. As has been rightly pointed out "the union branch meeting of today is often so dull an affair that the member not holding any office in the branch who has been persuaded by a keen member to attend comes home with the impression that he has wasted his time."<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding these general factors, the tendency towards membership non-participation in the GMB has been exacerbated by its branch structure. One of the major conclusions of the PEP survey, although it oversimplified the issue, was that: "if the large branches were to be split up into a number of smaller branches the numbers attending branch meetings and

taking part in important union business would be nearly doubled."<sup>38</sup> Certainly this makes sense a priori. Moreover, interviews conducted clearly established that the belief that smaller branches encouraged membership participation was one of the principal reasons behind the decisions taken by the regional leaderships in the Liverpool and Northern regions to break up their large branches.

There was, however, another principal reason behind the decisions taken to break up large branches in the Liverpool and Northern regions. It stemmed from the fundamental concern, of both the Northern regional secretary and the new regional lay leadership that came to power in Liverpool, that a small minority of people in large branches were exercising a disproportionate influence in the region through the branch block vote. This is a major theme and will be examined in the next chapter.

Membership participation is closely correlated with branch type as well as branch size and the plethora of general branches which dominate many of the GMB's regions have also inhibited membership involvement in branch meetings.<sup>39</sup> There are two ways in which this happens. The first is very obvious: general branches given their nature may cover workers over a very large area making transport to meetings often difficult and time-consuming and putting off all but the most dedicated from attending. If this were not enough of a problem, many branches also seem to meet at inconvenient



places and times, making it particularly difficult for women to attend. At the 1984 regional equal rights conference in the Birmingham region one ~~women~~ woman stated, to loud applause, that it was impossible for her to attend her branch meeting as it was held in a room over a pub at 6.30 on a Saturday evening - though one presumes that many men would also have problems in attending. The second, and more important, reason for the low attendance at meetings in general branches is that they are not seen by the membership as being relevant to their problems, reflecting a growing instrumentalism in membership attitudes that has been noted in other studies.<sup>40</sup> Many of the lay members interviewed said that attending their branch was "pointless" since they were not allowed to discuss factory or workplace problems and even lay activists said that this was a big drawback.

Research conducted over twenty years ago<sup>41</sup> indicated that average branch attendance in the GMB was 5 per cent, compared with the Engineers at 9 per cent; with attendance at the biggest meeting of the year averaging 13 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. A detailed analysis of branch attendance has not been the primary focus of this study, however, research indicated that there were variations between regions. Across similar types of branches, membership participation in Liverpool appeared higher than in the Northern region, with it being even lower in Birmingham. Within regions, research also tentatively confirmed that large branches are proportionately less well attended than



smaller branches; and that general branches are proportionately less well attended than workplace and one-industry branches.

In the Birmingham region, one of its largest general branches averaged less than one per cent of the membership attending meetings, with this rising to only 2 per cent at the meeting which cast the branch's block vote for its new general secretary. In another large general branch the corresponding figures were 2 per cent and 5 per cent. In contrast, two small workplace branches averaged between 5 and 6 per cent with nearly double that figure participating in the general secretary election. Attendance at two general branches in the Northern region averaged between 3 per cent and 5 per cent, with it reaching well into double figures at the meeting where they voted for Burlison as general secretary. Figures for two one-industry branches were significantly higher on both occasions. Attendance at two workplace branches in Liverpool was found to average roughly 10 per cent, with this rising to 17 per cent and 19 per cent in the general secretary ballot.

One should be wary of drawing any firm conclusions from the limited research conducted in this field; it indicated complexities of motivations and propensities to participate in branch decisions beyond its scope. It is, therefore, tentatively suggested that, while other influences may be at work, at least part of the explanation for regional

variations in membership participation at branch meetings is due to four factors. Firstly, differences in regional culture and traditions which exogenously affect regions. Second, variations in regional factional activity. Third, differences in the level of regional political activity and organisation. Lastly, and it is suggested importantly, variations in branch structure. One of the reasons for the higher level of membership participation in the Liverpool region compared with either the Birmingham or Northern regions is its workplace-based branch structure.

The Liverpool region's branch structure, however, is exceptional in the GMB. More typical are the Birmingham and Northern regions where general branches are a distinctive feature. They owe much of their existence to incentives provided to branch secretaries through the commission system: the significance of this is now examined.

### **The Commission system**

The commission system accounts for a substantial part of union income. Normally, 20 per cent of members contributions are retained at branch level for the payment of commission and, with these totalling over #25 million during 1984, that is a lot of money. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that no previous academic study has attempted to look at the GMB's commission system and examine its impact on the union's democratic structure, but then, as chapter one noted, the GMB



has been comparatively neglected as an area of study. This section seeks to rectify partially this omission by outlining the main elements of the commission system and examining the implications of its operation within the GMB for the union's finances, branch structure and democratic organisation.

The GMB's commission system has changed little over the past eighty years. It has two separate elements: branch secretaries commission and commission quarterage. Branch secretaries are paid 10 per cent of all check-off contributions attributable to the branch, while branches receive another 10 per cent quarterly from the region and traditionally this has been paid to collecting stewards elected by the branch. There can be little doubt that the job of branch secretary can, if done conscientiously, take up a considerable amount of time and involve not insignificant administrative costs. It does not seem unreasonable therefore, indeed it is common in other unions, for a branch secretary to be reimbursed for the time and administrative expenses they spend on union business, though whether the commission system is the appropriate vehicle to do this remains in question.

Of more concern to the union, financially hard-pressed as a result membership losses since 1979, is the increasingly indefensible payment of commission to collecting stewards who, overwhelmingly nowadays, do not collect membership contributions. This payment was perfectly understandable



right up until the 1950s and 1960s when the bulk of membership subscriptions were still collected manually, but since then, as Tables 4.1, 4.3 and 4.5 show for the three regions, there has been an enormous growth in the check-off system - the automatic deduction of union dues from the wage packet by employers. In 1968 less than one third of the GMWU's members were covered by check-off, but now it accounts for roughly 90 per cent of all contributions. This growing anomaly of paying salaries to check-off stewards who do virtually nothing to earn such rewards has produced only an extremely limited response at national level. There are two principal reasons for this: national officers' realisation that, for some time, shop stewards had been appointed check-off stewards as a way of recognising the time and effort they spent on the union's behalf; and, more importantly, their realisation that any attempt to change this system would be highly unpopular with a large proportion of the active membership and with powerful vested interests. As a result, national attempts to change the commission system have been discretionary rather than mandatory.

There have been two changes of rule over the last two decades aimed at rationalising the commission system. In 1962 the Birmingham region successfully proposed to Congress that, subject to regional committee approval, branches could levy members to provide a fund for shop stewards who lost earnings because of doing their job.<sup>42</sup> This was later enforced by union rule, with it being established that money could be

diverted to this fund from commission quarterage.<sup>43</sup> However, despite campaigning for this reform the Birmingham region has not enthusiastically taken advantage of the option it offers. In 1984 only #7,219 was transferred to commission funds, while #232,230 was paid out in collecting stewards salaries during the same period.<sup>44</sup> Other regions vary considerably, as Table 6.13 shows, but at three per cent the Birmingham region has the lowest proportion of collecting commission allocated to branch funds.

Table 4.13

Amount of money transferred to commission funds as a percentage of total collecting commission for all GMB regions during 1984.

London	35.0%
Southern	31.1%
Northern	28.7%
Lancashire	18.5%
Scottish	14.7%
Yorkshire	11.3%
Liverpool	8.1%
Midland & East Coast	5.9%
South West	3.2%
Birmingham	3.0%
GMB	17.4%

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984b)

The Northern region has been one of the few regions to actively use the option of setting up branch funds, reflecting its long-standing policy of closely involving shop stewards in both the recruitment process and the decision-making structure of the union, while the Liverpool region,

along with Birmingham, has tended to pay shop stewards directly through commission quarterage. It should be expected that regions with a high proportion of commission being transferred to branch funds would have a lower proportion of collecting stewards salaries being paid to shop stewards than branches with very small branch funds, but, although it is not possible to quantify, this does not appear to be necessarily the case. In the Birmingham region, in particular, a number of people interviewed complained that the appointment or re-appointment of check-off stewards was done by their branch secretary who gave these posts to personal friends rather than to shop stewards who deserved them. While there may be an element of sour grapes about these comments, and it is normal for such posts to be voted on at a branch meeting, in many branches the re-appointment of collecting stewards appears to go through "on the nod" without any discussion and with very few members present.

The problem with the informal system of using commission quarterage to pay shop stewards is that there is no certainty that a branch, particularly a general branch, will appoint its shop stewards as collecting stewards. The system is potentially open to abuse and there is clear evidence that, in some branches, the branch secretary, either alone or acting with a few key members, can effectively decide who holds these posts. In addition to the power a full-time branch secretary has by virtue of his position, therefore, is the power that can be derived from control of commission



quarterage and its potential use as a system of patronage. Again, it is difficult to assess how widespread this practice is since the only evidence is anecdotal, but, of the three regions studied, the impression given is that the patronage system is used more extensively in the Birmingham region than anywhere else, though it is apparent in a few of Liverpool's larger branches, principally those under Militant control. Also this impression is tentatively confirmed by the fact that, as Table 4.14 shows, the amount of money the Birmingham region pays out per member in collecting stewards salaries and commission funds combined is higher than any other region. Arguably this demonstrates the continued existence of a certain number of sinecures within the region.

Table 4.14

Amount paid yearly per member of collecting stewards salaries and commission funds combined for all GMB regions during 1984.

	#
Birmingham	3.29
Midlands & East Coast	3.23
London	3.09
Southern	2.96
Yorkshire	2.94
Liverpool	2.93
Lancashire	2.86
Scottish	2.75
Northern	2.58
South West	2.30
GMB	2.89

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984b)

The other rule change in the last two decades aimed at rationalising the commission system was introduced in 1984 as part of the Decision 84 proposals. It introduces a branch organisation fund allowing branches to divert payments to check-off stewards into this fund for spending on recruitment and organisation. Once more, great pains were taken by the national leadership to emphasise that this is optional not mandatory and it remains to be seen how successful this initiative will be. It is interesting to note, however, the greater stress that the leadership have placed on recruiting new members, a product of a realisation that providing incentives to branch secretaries and stewards to recruit new members is not much good in the economic climate of the 1980s, if the financial back-up is not available to allow branch members to organise recruitment campaigns.

The payment of commission to branch secretaries it has been argued gave them the incentive to recruit new members and often led ambitious secretaries to transform their branch into a large general branch in an attempt to make their position full-time. This process was widely apparent up until 1965: the union recognising "whole-time" branch secretaries, exempting them from periodic re-election, and even admitting them to the union's superannuation fund though still, anomalously, categorising them as lay members and hence able to stand for union office. The process, however, does not have to involve branch secretaries taking the job full-time for its operation. Branch secretaries in ordinary



employment have similar incentives to maximise their income as a useful bonus to their present job. The introduction of branch administrative officers and district officers has not altered this process significantly, although some regions have used district officers as branch secretaries as a way of avoiding paying out commission. On 1984 figures a secretary of a branch of one thousand fully paid-up members would receive #70 per week in commission, indicating both the potentially lucrative nature of such jobs and the motive for regions using district officers as branch secretaries.

The decision taken by regions to use their district officers as either industry based officers or to involve them in branch administration or some combination of these two roles has produced very different regional patterns of payments to branch secretaries as Table 4.15 shows. Although it is not appropriate to discuss officer structure at this point, the broad differences between the three regions studied need to be briefly mentioned to explain these differences. Thus the Northern region pays out more per member to branch secretaries than any other region because it took the decision that its district officers should be industrially based, while the Lancashire region pays out by far the least because the region is dominated by large branches many of which are run by district officers. That the Liverpool region, with its radically different branch structure should pay out the next least is on the face of it surprising, but as the next two chapters will demonstrate the region evolved



an officer structure which made district officers secretaries of a large number of small branches. The Birmingham region has had most of its large branches staffed by district officers and also merged some of its smaller branches with these larger branches in an attempt to make savings because of its declining membership.

Table 4.15

Amount paid yearly per member in branch secretaries salaries for all GMB regions during 1984.

	#
Northern	2.63
London	2.62
South West	2.59
Southern	2.42
Midlands & East Coast	2.28
Yorkshire	1.98
Birmingham	1.95
Scottish	1.52
Liverpool	1.41
Lancashire	1.16
GMB	2.03

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984b).

The implementation of Decision 84 has stopped this avenue for making financial economies by abolishing the district officer grade and specifying that branch secretary responsibilities should be conducted by lay members, rather than full-time officers. It is too early to judge the full implications of this reform, but, as far as branch secretary responsibilities are concerned, there is already evidence that its proposals are producing the re-emergence of powerful lay branch

secretaries of large branches who are able to stand for higher office in the union and, as shall be examined in the next chapter, use their branch block vote to facilitate their election.

Summarising briefly the main arguments: the commission system is at the heart of the strong tendencies that have traditionally existed within the GMB for its structure to be dominated by large general branches. The commission returned to branch secretaries is related to branch size, thus giving them a financial incentive to recruit new members without being particularly concerned where they come from or whether they can be represented adequately through their branch. With the growth of the check-off system the payment from commission quarterage to collecting stewards who invariably do not collect has grown increasingly indefensible. Informally, shop stewards have been made collecting stewards as a way of recognising their contribution to the union, but there is no guarantee that branches will recompense shop stewards for the financial losses they incur on union business.

The system is potentially open to abuse and there is clear evidence that branch secretaries, either acting alone or with a few key people, can use this money as patronage. In the face of these strong vested interests national attempts to reform the illogicality of the commission quarterage system have been half-hearted, emphasising their discretionary nature.

The opportunities they present to establish commission funds to make payments to shop stewards or branch organisation funds for spending money on organisation and recruitment are likely to be taken up in branches where there is not much of problem anyway, while nothing will be done in branches where change is needed. Lastly, Decision 84, although having increasing democracy as one of its stated aims, appears to be replicating the problem that was noted in the early 1960s of a small number of powerful lay branch secretaries dominating regions through their control of branch block votes in elections.

The commission system, therefore, not only produces a tendency towards the formation of large and general branches, which, as the previous section noted, are less likely to be well attended, but it also encourages the concentration of power at branch level in the hands of the branch secretary and, in some cases, a few key people. This suggests that any national attempt to increase democracy at the branch level will have to tackle fundamentally the inherent logic of the commission system if it is to succeed in any substantial way.

### Conclusion

It is a commonplace to say that trade unions are their members, but few recent studies<sup>46</sup> have sought to examine how these members are recruited and organised within a union's



structure and relate this to concepts of union democracy. In academic circles it has become unfashionable to examine union constitutional arrangements<sup>47</sup> or structural factors<sup>48</sup> affecting union government, instead the vogue has been to place an often exaggerated emphasis on the importance of the workplace<sup>49</sup> and on external factors.<sup>50</sup> Accepting that trade unions cannot be treated as self-contained systems, and that studies of union democracy must take full account of the implications stemming from the growth in workplace bargaining, still must leave any serious study of trade union government with the task of examining the internal decision-making structures that operate in different unions, since unions can and do exercise discretion to change their structures with fundamental consequences for democracy. It is in this sense that the governmental arrangements of a union's rule book and its organisational structure are of distinct relevance.

In the case of the GMB, its regionalised nature means that individual regions can exercise this discretion, developing structures and policies very different from those of the union as a whole. This chapter has sought to analyse some of the elements of this discretion. It is worth stating clearly its parameters and making eidetic what has been excluded from analysis at this point. The chapter has focused on non-bargaining issues not bargaining issues. These will be dealt with in Chapter 6. It has focused on the degree of horizontal dispersion of decision-making at branch

level, not on the degree of vertical decentralisation of decision-making to the branch level or on branch elections to regional bodies. These will be discussed in the next chapter. Within these parameters the study has shown that substantial variations have existed during the period, in regional recruitment policies and performances and in regional branch structures, which offer insights into the dynamics of democracy within the GMB.

The GMB's membership growth record has been less than inspiring for a number of years. Its poor record compared with its major competitors has not been lost on the national leadership. Most of the reforms introduced into the GMB from the 1960s onwards have had increasing membership or competing more successfully with its rivals as their primary objective, but none of them have been notably successful. The GMB leadership's charter for change, Decision 84, is remarkably candid about the union's past performance. In a section of the document revealing titled "the historical problems" it comments:

" Since the war our membership performance has been weak, relative to other unions: we failed to keep pace with the growth of membership in manufacturing in the '50s and '60s, and whilst we kept pace in the private sector in the '70s we fell seriously behind in the rapidly growing area of public service union membership, despite the strength of our initial position." 51

Three types of factors can be identified to explain this performance: exogenous, GMB national specific, and regional specific. The study found that exogenous factors, most



principally the level of employment, provided only a very small part of the explanation for the GMB's poor growth record. While the growth of white collar trade unionism, where the GMB was only partly organised, was one reason why the union's recruitment record was far inferior to either NUPE or NALGO, by definition, exogenous factors applied equally to its major rival the TGWU which recruits in identical areas and performed better during the period.

In contrast, specifically national GMB factors had significant explanatory power. In overall growth terms, a major reason for the GMB's poor record was the inability of the national leadership to attract merger partners. However, distinguishing between natural and merger growth, the union's natural growth performance has been impeded by the passive attitude adopted to recruitment in the Cooper era; its "benefit-oriented" rather than "service oriented" approach and its image as an conservative anti-strike union during this period; and the lack of a clear industrial focus for membership representation in the union's structure.

Notwithstanding these national factors, the study showed substantial variations in the recruitment and retention performance of the Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions which could not be explained by the differential regional impact of exogenous constraints.

The two major variations during the 1968-84 period, the rapid growth in membership in the Liverpool region between 1973-



1978 and the far better retention performance of the Northern region from 1978-1984, can only be explained by specific internal regional factors. In clearly establishing that regions have a large amount of discretion over their membership growth the study confirms and extends a recent study<sup>22</sup> which argued that the Scottish and Northern regions grew faster than other regions during the 1960s because of their regional secretaries using their power to break away from the union's passive approach to membership recruitment and hostility to industrial action; to involve shop stewards in negotiations; introduce changes in branch structure; and actively involve themselves in recruitment.

These findings apply almost equally to the Northern region since 1978. Under Burlison's leadership, the Northern region has developed a planned recruitment policy and organisation, forming county recruitment teams and involving shop stewards and other lay activists directly in recruitment. Increasing the region's membership has been stressed as a priority at the three-monthly conferences of branch secretaries and chairs that Burlison has instituted, while new members have been attracted to the union by the high media profile that he has introduced and the campaigning image that the union has developed in the region. Although the practice of splitting up very large branches, introduced by Burlison's predecessor Cunningham, has been continued, however, the region, unlike Liverpool, has not introduced any radical change in its branch structure. It is this change which distinguishes the

rapid growth of the Liverpool region during the 1973-78 period. This stemmed from membership pressure following the Pilkingtons dispute which resulted in widespread changes on the regional council and committee. It was the new politicised lay leadership which was elected, not the regional secretary, that was the motive force behind changes which expanded the role of shop stewards and transformed the union's image in the region and, even more significantly, totally altered the region's branch structure through adopting a conscious policy of splitting up both large and general branches and encouraging potential new members to form their own workplace branches.

Generalising, it is suggested that trade unions can improve their membership performance through treating recruitment as a national and regional priority; producing national and regional recruitment plans; forming national and regional recruitment organisations; involving shop stewards and local activists in the recruitment process; presenting a good national and regional image for the union; and through ensuring that their branch and representational structures are perceived as being relevant to the needs of potential new members. It is not possible to generalise about the dynamics of change, however, since that is specific to individual unions. In the GMB's case the autonomy given to its regions is such that either regional secretaries or regional lay leaderships can pursue expansionist or innovative policies which are very different from those adopted by the national



leadership.

Nowhere is the ability of a region to exercise its discretion on an issue of fundamental importance to to democracy more apparent than in the area of branch structure. The low level of membership participation and the lack of any national policy on branch structure have been belatedly recognised by the national leadership. Decision 84, characteristically, freely admits that "some branches do not meet regularly, and do not act efficiently as the means of communications" and gives the following damning summary of branch organisation in the GMB.

" The level of involvement of the membership in attendance at branch meetings and hence the quality of "branch life" has seriously declined over the last few decades. Moreover, the structure of branches in the GMB has grown up historically on a very haphazard basis. There is a wide variation in the size of branches and the basis of branches, and there has been little central direction or even discussion over the structure of branches." 33

Although there has been no formal central direction on branch structure there have been strong central tendencies favouring the establishment of large general branches. These tendencies arise from the operation of the commission system and the recognition of full-time lay branch secretaries which has been a feature of the union since before the first world war. The commission system encourages ambitious branch secretaries to recruit new members, but it also produces a tendency for branch secretaries to transform their branches



into large general branches in order to maximise their income or maintain it in periods of membership loss. The financial logic of this system also encourages the concentration of power at branch level in the hands of branch secretaries acting with, in some cases, the co-operation of a few key people, since they will naturally want to control their financial destinies. In this, the commission quarterage system, designed originally to pay collecting stewards, but now extended to cover payments to shop stewards can be used as a potential tool of patronage. Successive general secretaries from Dukes to Williamson to Cooper have turned a blind eye to this practice and either tacitly or explicitly supported the formation of large general branches and their pervasiveness should not be underestimated. Although there has been encouragement at the national level, since the mid 1970s, to move away from large general branches they are still very much in evidence. Over half of the GMWU's membership are still in general branches. In 1982 the union still had 170 branches with over one thousand members compared with 171 at the end of the Sixties.

Despite these strong central tendencies the branch structures of the three study regions have developed very differently over the past twenty years. While the Birmingham region's branch structure has remained virtually fossilised, owing to the strength of the vested interests of the regional lay leadership and the absence of serious pressures from elsewhere; the Northern region under Cunningham split up its

very large branches, primarily to increase recruitment though improving democracy in the region was a subsidiary reason, but kept its general branches; and the Liverpool region split up both large and general branches moving much more towards a workplace-based branch structure than any of the GMB's other regions, with the regional lay leadership stating explicitly that making the region more democratic was the major reason for the introduction of these changes.

The evidence available confirms this reasoning that large general branches are less democratic than other branches, suggesting that smaller branches tend to be better attended, thereby enhancing democracy in the union by extending the horizontal dispersion of decision-making at the branch level. More importantly, however, as will be argued in the next chapter, splitting up large branches removes the possibility of these branches and hence a few branch secretaries dominating elections to the regional council, thereby extending the horizontal dispersion of decision-making at the regional level. Evidence also suggests that general branches are less well attended than other branches. This is often because of logistical difficulties in getting to meetings a long distance away, but also because, since they are not allowed to discuss individual workplace issues, they are not perceived as being particularly relevant.

Within the parameters set for the chapter, therefore, it is evident that, in general, membership participation in

decision-making on non-bargaining issues is more horizontally dispersed in the Liverpool region, with its high proportion of members in workplace branches, than it is in the Birmingham or Northern regions with their large general and general branch structures. However, such is the diversity of each regions branch structure that levels of participation vary widely within regions. It is the region which has the power to determine this structure and it is the region which will now be examined.



committees. Under the 1975 reform three standing committees were established; finance, organisation, and services, and lay participation was increased making them in the majority in each. Each committee has one representative per region and on the first two, seven of these are lay members, while on the third sub-committee there are six lay members and four regional secretaries. Lay membership participation in ad hoc sub-committees and Executive Council working parties varies but in recent years has always tended to have, at least, parity between regional secretaries and lay members, if not positively favouring the latter. As far as the union's de jure position is concerned, therefore, the 1975 reforms increased lay membership participation in decision-making both in the Executive Council and its sub-committee structure.

So far the term lay members has been used to denote those Executive Council members elected by regional councils. A number of these lay members, however, have no work occupation. Of the two Birmingham lay members on the EC in 1984, for example, one was a full-time branch secretary and the other retired. It is estimated that over half of the Executive Council's lay members are not directly in employment and many of these are full-time lay branch secretaries. Moreover, many lay members serve on the Executive Council continuously; in at least two of the cases studied, for well over ten years.<sup>27</sup> These members are, therefore, not representative of the bulk of the GMB's

membership, but they are, in theory, accountable to the membership through the regional council and regional committee structure and this is examined in Chapter 5.

The potential constitutional conflict between the Executive Council, responsible for the government of the union, and Congress, the union's supreme authority, is resolved in practice in favour of the Executive Council. This is inevitable. A study of another union's conference found that "it cannot satisfactorily fulfil the role of a legislature for one obvious reason. The Annual Conference assembles for only one week a year... For the rest of the time the Executive is in charge."<sup>29</sup> The same is true of the GMB's Congress. In addition, much of the Congress is dominated by the union's officers and Executive Council. The general secretary gives a full report and a keynote speech and a great deal of Congress time is spent hearing and discussing the reports of the union's national industrial officers.

Furthermore, the key resolutions at Congress are nearly always those put forward in the name of the Executive Council and the impetus for these policy initiatives is likely to have come from the general secretary or, occasionally, from a working group of a sub-committee of the Executive Council. On detailed issues, such as the union's major review of its organisation for the 1990s called Decision 84, the union's research department, which serviced the working groups set up to examine different aspects of the union's structure and



finances, was an important source of ideas and information and strongly influenced the direction of GMB policy.

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### Factional activity

As Chapter One noted, much of the literature on trade union democracy has focused on the importance of the existence of institutionalised opposition<sup>29</sup> or, in a weaker formulation, on leadership tolerance of organised opposition<sup>30</sup> and it was suggested that these two views are best seen as a continuum.<sup>31</sup> Factionalism was identified as a potentially significant intervening variable encouraging membership participation in union decision-making and one of the reasons research was focused on the GMB was its apparent lack of factional activity.

There is no use-value in defining factional activity in the GMB at a national level in terms which would allow a region to be thought of as a faction. Below the term faction is used to refer to organised opposition activity which cuts across regions.

In the early 1950s it was found that "except when the handful of Left-Wing delegates differs on a particular point, party divisions are absent from Congress. Voting is normally by region."<sup>32</sup> The situation is very much the same in the GMB in the 1980s. Delegates are reminded in the Congress agenda that:



"delegates should understand that they do not represent any particular Branch. Any delegate elected to Congress is a representative of the Region, and cannot, therefore, be mandated by a Branch."<sup>33</sup>

The delegate is accountable to no-one but the regional Congress delegation. It is normal practice for the regional secretary to hold all the regional delegation's voting cards and cast these according to the majority view reached by the delegation. In 1985 the London region caused a stir by each delegation member having his or her own voting card, but this has been exceptional. Normally, in terms of voting, the opportunity for opposition which does not win regional support is virtually non-existent. Similarly, speaking against the Executive Council view is difficult if the view does not have regional support as, on all major issues, the delegations are asked to appoint a member to express the region's collective view. There is very little scope for free debate and dissident views can really only be expressed through resolutions which manage to survive the obstacles presented by the regional delegations and the standing orders committee.

The union's rules and practices, therefore, minimise the likelihood of factional opposition surfacing at Congress unless that opposition has a majority in a region. Over the last ten years the union's London and Liverpool regions have developed a reputation for being more likely to espouse left-wing demands, but, apart from these, the other GMB regions have tended to give stalwart backing to the union's

leadership on virtually all political and most administrative issues.

2.

There is factional activity in the GMB but it is very limited. At various times attempts have been made to organise a "broad left" in the union such as exists in the TGWU, NCU, AEU and a number of other unions. These attempts have not proved particularly successful. The most recent attempt at factional organisation has been through the auspices of the Broad Left Organising Committee movement, which has considerable support in other unions, but a joint BLDC meeting of NCU and GMB delegates at the 1985 Congress attracted only five GMB members out of approximately fifty present. This is indicative of the weakness of opposition in the GMB.

The main factional activity that does exist in the GMB comes from the Militant tendency<sup>34</sup> and is centred on local government, particularly in Liverpool. This has been the base for a Militant inspired and organised attempt to create a national joint shop stewards' organisation in local government.<sup>35</sup> There are a few Militant supporters in other regions, mainly London, and some of them do get elected to Congress, but once they get known the region's officers are likely to use their influence to try to prevent them from getting elected in the future. They may even try and replace current delegates: a Militant delegate from the Yorkshire region to the 1987 Congress was replaced when he broke a



leg and went into hospital. This is not likely to be attempted in the future, however, as the delegate went to a judge in chambers and managed to get re-instated and costs awarded against the union.<sup>34</sup>

Liverpool is also the base for the production of "The General Worker" which styles itself as the paper of the general workers and boilermakers' broad left. Aimed to be issued quarterly, its production appears to be sporadic and its distribution extremely limited. Its tone is Militant, and among its campaign aims is the familiar Militant slogan that the wages of all officials should be no more than the average wage of a skilled worker; it seems to be another "front" organisation set up to suck new members into the Militant tendency. It does, however, have some non-Militant support. This is principally because some of its aims are attractive to members: the regular election of all officials; for national industrial conference decisions to be binding on negotiators; and for the Executive Council to be made up of lay members with officials playing an advisory role only.<sup>37</sup>

Distributing propaganda and mobilising electoral support have been highlighted as the hallmarks of factional activity.<sup>38</sup>

As far as national factional activity is concerned, however, propaganda distribution in the GMB is extremely limited.

There is also little regular scope for factional activity in union elections at national level since the GMB appoints its national officers. The election of Basnett's successor,



REGIONAL POWER

The importance of the region in the structure of the GMB has been commented on by virtually every journalistic or academic survey or study of trade unions. Recognising the power that regional secretaries can exercise they have been variously labelled barons,<sup>1</sup> oligarchic<sup>2</sup> or mini-general secretaries.<sup>3</sup> Without exception, however, there has been no serious attempt to provide any detailed examination of how a region operates.<sup>4</sup> This has meant that not only have such descriptions lacked sufficient factual underpinning, they have also not been subjected to critical analysis. As the previous chapter showed, the regional secretary is not the only potential agent of change within a region; the existence of other potential sources of power suggests that the image of the regional secretary as a feudal baron is open to question.

The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, twofold: factual and analytical. Firstly, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature by describing how regions in the GMB are organised and operate; and, second, it seeks to analyse the distribution of power relations, both within the region and between the region and national and branch levels, and examine their implications for democracy within the GMWU and for democracy in trade unions in general. Encompassing these

two aims presents certain problems in structuring the chapter. Since description and analysis naturally go hand in hand any attempt to separate them is artificial and can be obfuscatory. Although it has some benefits, therefore, it is not rigorously attempted where clarity of argument would be affected.

Bearing in mind these caveats the research has been divided into two parts. The first section presents the bulk of the descriptive data on regional organisation, though it is also concerned with the vertical distribution of power in the union. The second is primarily analytical, focusing on regional elections and decision-making processes though it does have descriptive content. It is followed by concluding comments summarising the main arguments and themes.

### The power of the rule-book

The boundaries of the GMB's ten regions today remain substantially the same as those established following the 1936 re-organisation. The union's rules stipulate that each region shall be administered from a regional office and that no region can have the power to establish sub-areas or sub-regional offices without the approval of the Executive Council, which also can determine geographical boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Constitutionally, the ultimate authority in a region is the

regional council. It has one delegate for every one thousand financial members in the region with a minimum and maximum representation of 16 and 130 respectively.<sup>6</sup> The regional council is elected every two years from nominations sent in by branches which, regardless of size, can nominate only one member and have only one representative.<sup>7</sup> Despite its de jure powers, which vest it with the management and administration of the business and affairs of the region,<sup>8</sup> the regional council is not a very important body. It meets only every six months and most of its decisions give formal approval to what has been done elsewhere.

The standard procedure at meetings is for the regional secretary to give a report and for the minutes of the regional committee to be presented. The minutes are normally much attenuated, often simply a list of decisions reached, because of the desire for confidentiality in dealing with sensitive topics such as appeals for personal financial assistance or with disciplinary matters. The meeting can question the regional secretary or any member of the regional committee on decisions taken and, occasionally, diligent individuals do ask embarrassing questions, but the odds are very much against them since they are not likely to have the detailed background information available to the regional secretary or regional committee members. Moreover, such is the time lag that the issue, for example the handling of an industrial dispute, is likely to have been already settled. The de facto function of the regional council is really to



bring together members from all over the region and to explain the policies of the union and the benefits that it can offer. It is also to elect from amongst its members the regional committee and representatives to other bodies; the Executive Council; the Appeals Tribunal; the TUC Congress; and the Labour Party Conference.<sup>9</sup> In reality, therefore, it is the regional committee and not the regional council which is the most important elected body in the region. The regional council acts as a "rubber stamp" for decisions taken by the regional committee and is only important in so far as it elects the committee, the region's two delegates to the Executive Council, and delegates to other bodies.

The regional committee holds office for the same period as the regional council and, by rule, has to meet every four weeks and may meet more frequently, if business requires it, at the discretion of the regional secretary in consultation with the regional chairman.<sup>10</sup> Each region has traditionally had a regional committee of seven or eight members, except the Northern region which has had ten, owing to the regional secretary's idiosyncratic interpretation of the rule stipulating that the first meeting of a new regional council should elect a regional chairman, two lay delegates to the national body and a regional committee of seven members.<sup>11</sup> The regional committee has the authority examine the books and accounts of any branch and can take charge of any of the union's property within the region.<sup>12</sup> The regional committee is also the disciplinary authority in the region, having the

power to authorise the regional secretary to prosecute any regional or branch official which it thinks is guilty of misapplying union funds or property,<sup>13</sup> though there is a right of appeal to the Executive Council whose decision is final.<sup>14</sup>

The regional committee is also responsible for appointing regional officials as well as dismissing them. Before Decision 84 the region appointed district officers who were not subject to election and it also appointed regional officers who were called appointed officers and became regional officers following a confirmatory election by the membership after two years; now the region appoints organisers who have to be elected within five years of appointment.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the union's rules also give the regional committee the power to sanction a strike where not more than 300 members are involved.<sup>16</sup>

Brief comparisons with its great rival the TGWU indicate the regionalised nature of the GMWU. All full-time officers in the TGWU are appointed by its executive at national level, which is also responsible for disciplinary matters. It was not until 1968 that responsibility for hiring office workers and buying office equipment was passed down from Transport House to regional secretaries and administrative and financial decision-making correspondingly slightly decentralised<sup>17</sup> whereas the GMWU's regions have always had such powers. Moreover, while the TGWU's national



headquarters has links with its branches through both its regional organisation and through its trade groups, the regions in the GMWU are the sole formal means of communication with the branch, despite the introduction of the Industrial Conference structure. The strength of the regions in the GMWU is also reinforced by the division of representation on the Executive Council and at Congress into regions, allowing regional secretaries and senior lay members to protect regional interests from action at the national level which might challenge their position. In contrast, the lack of these and other constraints in the TGWU enabled Jack Jones, their general secretary, to introduce sweeping reforms decentralising bargaining in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>18</sup> (Bargaining issues are examined in the next chapter).

The GMB's regions not only possess functions and responsibilities which, in other trade unions, are exercised at a national level, they also have much greater control over branches than most other unions. The rules of the GMW section give the regional committee almost absolute power over the branch. As was noted in chapter four, the regional committee has the power to close any branch or merge any branches "for any reason which it deems good and sufficient, or where, in its judgement, it is considered advisable to do so."<sup>19</sup> Combined with rules forbidding written communication between branches without the approval of the regional council or committee or the Executive Council, and forbidding members attending meetings of other branches without the approval of



the regional secretary,<sup>20</sup> this demonstrates the formidable constitutional powers vested in the regional council, committee and in the office of regional secretary.

It would be wrong to infer that these rules are constantly in use. Branches are normally given a wide degree of latitude and much of the work of the regional committee is routine. It deals with claims for sickness, accident and burial benefit, compensation, travelling expenses, industrial injuries, problems with defaulting shop stewards, and financial appeals and correspondence from outside bodies. The rules do give the regional committee almost total control over the branch, however, and, as the previous chapter showed, in certain cases they are willing and prepared to use this discretion that the GMWU's constitution gives them.

The regional secretary is the region's administrator. He is responsible for drawing up the agendas for meetings of the regional committee and council and sending out the calling notices. He acts as the employer of the staff at the regional office and is in charge of the regional and district officers.<sup>21</sup> The office staff may vary from region to region but normally include the following posts: finance officer, health and safety officer, legal officer, and education officer, with perhaps separate officers for equal rights and political activities, though these functions may be combined with other posts. These staff and the regional and district officers are supported by secretarial and clerical staff also

under the control of the regional secretary, and co-ordinated by his personal secretary. The control that the regional secretary has over staff can be traced back right to the early days of the union's history, with nepotism, at certain times, being a prominent feature of staff appointments.<sup>22</sup>

There are some slight differences in the ways that regions organise their staff, especially the way that district officers are organised, though again, as the next chapter shows, Decision 84 is changing this. The fieldwork conducted in the three regions also showed substantially similar patterns in the way that regions organised their outlying district offices, reflecting a common approach to geographical problems and areas of membership concentration. While the Birmingham region has eight district or branch administrative officers each in a separate office around the region, the Northern region has seven district officers at four separate locations, three of them based in Sunderland. The Liverpool region, by necessity, has to be slightly different, having two regional officers in Belfast and three district officers in an outlying office in Portadown. However, in Wales it has one regional officer in Colwyn Bay and a district officer in Wrexham and in its three other sub-offices it has continued the practice of allocating regional officers to sub-offices by stationing two of them in St Helens.

## Regional Elections

The focus of voting in the GMB is the branch rather than the individual. The method of election for most posts is by the branch "block vote" system: the casting of the total membership of the branch according to the decision reached by the branch meeting. In all, the branch, in addition to electing its secretary and a branch committee, elects delegates to regional industrial and equal rights conferences, can nominate one person and vote for: periodically, delegates to Congress and the regional council; occasionally a regional officer or organiser; and, even more occasionally, a general secretary. Delegates to the GMBU's national governing body, two per region plus the regional secretary, are indirectly elected, being chosen by the regional council<sup>23</sup> as is the regional committee.

This chapter confines itself to the regional core of elections, looking briefly at officer elections, but concentrating mainly on elections to the regional council and committee. It will also refer to the elections for a region's Congress delegation since these are very similar in nature to regional council elections.

### **Elections for regional officers**

Apart from the election of the general secretary, and the extremely rare case where the Executive Council wishes to



appoint a national officer or regional secretary who has not previously been subject to an election,<sup>24</sup> the only full-time officer elections in the GMB are to confirm the appointment of regional officers or, as they are to be called following Decision 84's changes, organisers. This has not always been the case. Under the amalgamation rules all officer posts were required to come up for re-election every second year. When the first such elections were held in 1926, however, as chapter two noted, the National Minority Movement, a Communist sponsored trade union front organisation, stood candidates against virtually every officer in the union, leading the Congress of that year to amend the rules so that election was only required in the first instance.<sup>25</sup>

Regional Officer elections have not been at all competitive. The appointed official has two years to get "known" in the region and is given every opportunity to do so by the regional secretary and the officers, who also discourage well-known lay people from standing against their preferred candidate. Not surprisingly, therefore, no appointed officer has ever been defeated in a confirmatory election in the union's history and, as Table 5.1 shows, in many regions these elections are simply not contested. In three regions, Midlands and East Cost, South West and Yorkshire no regional officer elections were contested between 1972 and 1983, while the Scottish region's last contested election was in 1973. Of the three study regions, Birmingham last had a contested election in 1977 when the appointed officer duly won by

59,000 votes to 770; the Northern region's only two contested elections during the period were both held in 1982 and similarly won overwhelmingly; and of the five contestants in the Liverpool region the closest, in 1978, gave the appointed officer a comfortable win by 35,000 votes to 11,700. Noting this, and another case where a well-known lay activist stood against the official candidate, a recent study of balloting has, though it recognised the failure of these activists to threaten the official candidate, suggested that "the

Table 5.1

Regional officer elections 1972-85

Region	Elections Contested	Elections Uncontested
Birmingham	2	8
Liverpool	5	3
Northern	2	5
Lancashire	2	5
Midlands & E.C.	-	3
Southern	2	5
South West	-	4
London	7	2
Scottish	1	8
Yorkshire	-	8

SOURCE: Calculated from GMWU Congress reports

Liverpool region provides the exception to this formal confirmatory process."<sup>24</sup> This appears to rather overstate the case. Elections have been contested more regularly in the London region, with opposition candidates securing a similar percentage poll on at least two occasions, while the Lancashire region saw the most competitive election during the period in 1983 with the appointed officer winning by

48,000 to 19,900. Although there are variations in this confirmatory process there are no real exceptions: it is, above all, a futile exercise<sup>26</sup> and there seems little chance that the confirmatory elections for organisers which can now be held any time within five years<sup>27</sup> will be any more meaningful as contests.

### Regional electoral variations

More important are the elections to the regional council and the elections from it of the regional committee. Competition in these elections varies greatly between regions. Since the rules provide that the regional council comprises one delegate for every one thousand members, the growth in membership during the 1960s and for most of the 1970s meant that there was very little competition for places, with regions frequently having more places than candidates.

This has begun to change with the onset of the recession, there were, in general across the union, more nominations per seat in 1983 than in 1981, but in the London region there were not enough candidates to hold contests in either of these years or in 1979,<sup>28</sup> and no contests in Birmingham and Lancashire in 1981 and the Midlands and East Coast region in 1983. Only the Liverpool and Scottish regions have seen consistent competitive elections. Liverpool, had 144 candidates for 80 places in 1981 and 122 candidates for 70 places in 1983. Table 5.2 summarises the details.



Table 5.2

Analysis of competition for seats on the regional council in the 1983-85(1981-83) regional elections.

Region	Nominations	Seats	Nom's/seat
London	95 (97)	55 (97)	1.00 (1.00)
Lancashire	107 (94)	87 (94)	1.23 (1.00)
Northern	124 (117)	99 (110)	1.25 (1.06)
Yorkshire	112 (108)	83 (92)	1.35 (1.17)
Southern	92 (105)	76 (83)	1.21 (1.26)
Scottish	179 (154)	100 (107)	1.79 (1.44)
Birmingham	100 (97)	78 (97)	1.28 (1.00)
Liverpool	122 (144)	70 (80)	1.74 (1.80)
Midland	64 (105)	64 (74)	1.00 (1.42)
South West	na	49 (48)	nc

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984c) p181

Elections for the regional delegations to the union's annual Congress are much more competitive. As Table 5.3 shows, most regions regularly have more than two candidates per place, with elections being particularly competitive in the Scottish, Midlands and East Coast and Liverpool regions and also in the smallest region the South West.

The number of people standing for election to the regional council, however, can, at best, provide only a crude indication of competitiveness. Even purely electoralist conceptions of democracy<sup>29</sup> require close contests and there is no alternative to examining, in detail, the GMB's balloting system in the three study regions to analyse how competitive these elections really are.

Table 5.3

Analysis of competition for places on the regional delegations to the 1984 (1983) Congress

Region	Nominations	Places	Nom's/Place
London	88 (90)	41 (45)	2.15 (2.00)
Lancashire	88 (88)	42 (44)	2.09 (2.00)
Northern	120 (120)	42 (44)	2.09 (2.00)
Yorkshire	85 (91)	40 (41)	2.13 (2.22)
Southern	80 (79)	40 (41)	2.00 (1.93)
Scottish	152 (146)	48 (50)	3.17 (2.92)
Birmingham	81 (70)	36 (39)	2.25 (1.79)
Liverpool	96 (92)	33 (35)	2.91 (2.63)
Midland	101 (92)	32 (33)	3.16 (2.79)
South West	71 (56)	23 (24)	3.09 (2.33)

SOURCE: Calculated from GMBATU (1984c) p182

#### THE BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

The Birmingham region, unlike some others, operates a straightforward ballot of all valid nominations for elections to the regional council and to Congress. As has been noted there were no elections for the 1981-83 regional council, but in the elections for the 1983-85 regional council there were 100 candidates for 78 places and there have been roughly twice as many candidates as places in the Congress delegation elections each year during the period 1980-86. In both these elections the block votes of the large general branches in the region are crucial. As Table 4.7 demonstrated the largest branch in the Birmingham region has over 6,000 members, eight per cent of the region's total

membership, with four other branches having between 3,000 and 4,000 members, accounting for a further eighteen per cent of total membership. Since the last chapter found that large general branches are likely to be more poorly attended than smaller workplaces or one-industry branches, the branch block vote system can give those few who do attend a potentially disproportionate influence. The union's rules, in theory, mitigate this by stipulating that each branch, regardless of size may only nominate one delegate to the regional council<sup>30</sup> and one to Congress,<sup>31</sup> however, its practical effect in the Birmingham region has been to concentrate power in an even smaller number of hands.

Within the region there is a strong feeling amongst the larger branches that branches of 25 members should not be treated the same as those with over 3,000 members. Many of those interviewed stated that it was unfair that somebody from a small branch had a one in twenty-five chance of going to Congress, but somebody from a large branch only had one chance in three thousand. While this view is widely shared it is wrong on two counts: first it does not take account of the low attendance at branch meetings, and second it confuses the chances of being nominated with those of being elected.

Members from small branches have virtually no chance of being elected, unless they have good contacts. This is because of the twin effects of the operation of the block vote system and the GMB's rules, which severely limit the scope for



informed decisions to be taken in these elections. Along with restricting the number of nominations a branch can make, as has been noted, the union's rules also forbid inter-branch communication and members attending branches other than their own. Moreover, candidates are not allowed to make personal statements and it was not until the 1981 regional council and Congress elections that they had to state their age and occupation - a minor change that caused outrage amongst some of the members in the region. Consequently, branches are given a minimum of information about the candidates standing and forbidden by rule from finding out anything more. As a result, when a ballot paper for the regional council or Congress delegation elections is put before a branch meeting, the membership are likely to know only one or two of the 100 or so candidates who are standing.

These circumstances reinforce membership apathy. A number of those interviewed expressed the view that it was pointless voting for people they did not know and would probably never meet. They also strengthen the position of those people who do know some of the candidates: the full-time lay branch secretaries; district and branch administrative officers; and the lay activist who is a delegate to an industrial conference. In theory, every branch member participating in the 1983 regional council elections had 78 votes, but only extremely rarely are branch members given the full list of candidates to vote for in a secret ballot.

The regular practice is for the branch secretary to go through the names at the branch meeting for the branch to "see who they know" and this obviously gives the branch secretary enormous influence over the outcome. The aphorism "knowledge is power" is extremely pertinent to these elections. Frequently, such is the lack of knowledge or interest that the branch leaves the decision on who to vote for to the branch committee, which often defers to the views of the branch secretary, or to the branch secretary alone. Even where a branch decides to support certain candidates, it is extremely rare that it will pick a full slate and those with knowledge of particular candidates, again principally the branch secretary, can easily secure the branches vote for candidates they personally favour. Clearly, therefore, in the Birmingham region, the practical effect of the GMB's rule book provisions relating to elections to regional council and Congress delegation elections is to give enormous power to secretaries of large branches.

The lack of information about candidates also gives a potential influence to regional officers, many of whom are conspicuously more assiduous in attending branch meetings around election times. As one cynic put it "at least during election time you get a chance to see your regional officer." While ostensibly there to talk about industrial issues, regional officers have been known to offer advice on suitable candidates to support. Not all regional officers act in this way, but many have personal friends standing for election or



re-election and make an effort to promote their chances. Inevitably, the regional officer tends to be in a weaker position for offering advice than the branch secretary, especially if the latter is a full-time lay member or an officer, but they do have a power to persuade which can be influential since many of the members attending branch meetings do not seem to care who sits on the regional council, or is a delegate to Congress, and they are liable to agree to any name that is recommended to them.

Of course, it is possible to exaggerate the power that branch secretaries from large branches and, to a much lesser extent, certain regional officers wield in the region's elections. While the combined effect of the balloting system and the union's rules is to produce a paucity of information about candidates which, in turn, puts power in the hands of those "in the know," a number of branches have responded to this by developing explicit policies or informal rules of thumb to determine their voting patterns. The Kidderminster branch has a policy to positively discriminate in favour of women candidates. Other branches have a policy not to vote for unemployed or retired candidates and many branches, particularly those in gas and engineering, tend to vote for candidates from the same industry or occupation. It is only a few of the more active branches, however, that have adopted clear voting guidelines and although the tendency to vote for candidates from the same industry or occupation is fairly widespread among company and one-industry branches the



dominance of the region by large general branches limits this impact. Interestingly, this practice of branches voting for candidates from the same industry is also apparent in the executive elections of the TGWU and in the AUEW(E)'s less important elections.<sup>32</sup> The TGWU similarly issues no election addresses and disallows canvassing, but where its individual branch ballot system, resulting in the actual votes cast being recorded for the respective candidates, precludes a small number of people exercising a great deal of influence, the GMB's branch block vote facilitates power being concentrated in a few hands.

Party politics played no part in the 1983 and 1985 elections to the regional council or the three Congress delegation elections during this period of study. There appear to be no political factions in the Birmingham region and very few signs of any emerging. In the absence of political information about candidates it might be expected that voting decisions would, as in the TGWU, be based on the industrial identity of candidates. While this is evident to some extent, it is not nearly so important a factor, however, as candidates being known and acceptable to a few key people. There was clear evidence in all the elections studied in the Birmingham region that the region's two principal lay full-time branch secretaries acted closely with the district officers and the remaining branch administrative officers in the region to ensure that the candidates that they favoured were elected. Between them, in 1983, these ten branch

secretaries, as Table 5.4 shows, were responsible for 48 per cent of the total membership, enabling them to exercise a decisive influence in the regional council and Congress elections. In effect the "big ten" branch secretaries form the central core of an organised group whose membership depends on an individual maintaining good relations with its critical elements. Its other members also tend to be branch secretaries because of their potential control over branch votes, but may include influential shop stewards or branch chairmen.

This group is not organised like "the Group" in the AUEW,<sup>33</sup> nor it is a Party or a faction in the sense that these words have been used.<sup>34</sup> It does not have regular meetings, relying on informal contact, and, although its members could be described as solid right-wing Labour, their purpose is not to put forward political views, merely to maintain their existing positions in the region, making them essentially a part of the bureaucracy rather than a faction opposing it. The "big ten's" group, therefore, is more of a loose alliance of personal friends and like-thinking individuals than an organised caucus or party or faction, but nevertheless it has been highly successful in dominating the elections for the regional council and Congress delegations.

The two key lay branch secretaries are the only members of the "big ten" eligible to stand for the election and, not surprisingly, came top of the poll in the regional council

Table 5.4

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Analysis of membership covered by district officer (DO); branch administrative officer (BAO) and full-time lay members (FT) as branch secretaries in 1983.

Name	Branch	Size	
A. Berry (DO)	Cheltenham	3400	
	Gloucester Gas	304	
	Winchcombe	59	3763
C. Cole (DO)	Tamworth	3052	
	Reddicap Eng.	722	3774
W. Collins (DO)	Broad Oak	28	
	Hereford Eng.	883	
	Hereford Painters	253	
	Rotherway Eng.	149	1313
A. Parker (DO)	Stafford Stoke Mun.	1013	
	Heath Hayes	110	1123
Mrs M Walton (DO)	Brierley Hill BSR	1169	
	BSR MATSA	113	
	Hotel & Catering	849	2131
G. Westwood (DO)	Birmingham Central	3205	
	B/ham Central MATSA	429	
	F. Dunlop & Erdington	6107	9741
L. Hines (BAO)	Willenhall	3408	
	W'ton Area MATSA	486	3894
R. Stoddart (BAO)	Wellington	3143	
	Market Drayton	372	3515
Mrs F. Blake (FT)	Banbury		1959
N. Hough (FT)	Brierley Hill		2799
Total Membership		48%	<u>35,012</u>

SOURCE: Branch income and expenditure computer print-out sheets 25 June 1983. Manual pay sheets and records.



elections. They were followed by a large number of other branch secretaries, reflecting both their acceptability to the "big ten" and their power<sup>£-</sup> at the local level. Of the 78 delegates to the 1983-85 regional council 42 were current branch secretaries, with interviews revealing that many of the others had been branch secretaries previously and were loyally renominated and supported by their branch for as long as they were willing to serve. If a regional council member is not a current or former branch secretary then he or she is likely to be a shop stewards or convenor and may be a branch chairman in addition to this. The relevant statistics are summarised in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS REGION

Analysis of 1983-85 regional council by offices currently held

Office held	Number
Branch Secretary	21
Branch Secretary and Shop steward	21
Shop steward	16
Shop steward and Branch Chairman	14
Branch Chairman	4
None	2

78

SOURCE; 1983 Regional Council Ballot Paper

The narrow horizontal dispersion of power at the local level, concentrated in the hands of the "big ten" and their supporters, means that an almost self-selecting group sit on the regional council and, correspondingly, turnover of membership is low. In the 1983-85 regional council election only nine of the 1981-83 regional council members who stood for re-election were defeated. Of these six were unemployed and either very near retirement age or fully retired, the youngest 63, the oldest 76; one was in the process of becoming a full-time officer; and only two were defeated for no apparent reason. This pattern was continued in the 1985-87 elections when, again, there were 100 candidates but this time for only 70 places. There was some turnover of candidates, with just over a third being newly elected; however, again only nine of those standing for re-election were defeated, with two-thirds of these being of advanced age. Six of these defeated candidates were the first six runners up and, since vacancies that occur during the two year period are filled by the next highest on the list, at least three of these became members of the 1983-85 regional council eventually.

While it appears that putting the age of candidates on the ballot paper has had some effect on voting choices, the most important factor is still the ability of a candidate to be known and liked by the "big ten". Nine members of the 1983-85 regional council were well into their sixties and two in

their seventies. It is fanciful, however, to talk of the oligarchic petrification<sup>35</sup> of the regional council since its average age is only forty-eight. But there are very few young members; only three of the 1983-85 regional council were under thirty when they were elected, with the bulk of the members being well into middle age, exactly half being fifty or older.

Similarly, the occupational composition of the regional council reflects the concentration of power in the hands of the group centred around the "big ten", who tend to favour people from the same occupational and educational background, and this is reinforced by the tendency for company and one-industry branches to vote for candidates from the same industry. Fifty-six of the 78 members of the 1983-85 regional council came from three main areas: 24 worked in engineering; 20 worked for the public utilities (gas, water, electricity); and 12 had no work occupation (full-time secretaries, retired or unemployed). Other areas were significantly under-represented: local government had only four representatives; and the health service and the chemical industry both had only one.

Elections for the region's Congress delegation are conducted under virtually identical rules to the regional council elections and follow the same pattern of power concentration. It is to be expected that there would be some overlap between membership of the regional council and attendance as a delegate to the union's Congress. Only the more active



members are likely to be prepared to take a week's holiday to attend Congress and, in elections where information about candidates is minimal, regional council members are likely to be better known and hence stand a better chance of being elected. However, the degree of overlap is extensive and indicative of the power of the group led by the "big ten". Thirty of the 44 delegates to the union's 1982 Congress were members of the 1981-83 regional council, but a higher proportion, 27 out of the 36 delegates to the 1984 Congress, were members of the 1983-85 regional council. Moreover, many of the delegates had also been attending Congress continuously for a number of years. Despite the Birmingham region's delegation shrinking in size by over a third between 1979 and 1985 due to the decline in membership, of the 44 delegates to the 1982 Congress, 17 had attended ten years previously and no less than 28 had been going to Congress continually for the last five years. Only two had never attended a Congress before. An even higher proportion, virtually half, of the 1984 Congress delegation had attended ten or more years previously, with 26 out of the 36 delegates having attended for the last five years.

While the influence of the group centred around the "big ten" is pervasive it is not total and it would be wrong to suggest that all the delegates to the regional council and to Congress have been "fixed" by the block votes of the full-time lay branch secretaries and the district and branch administrative officers. There are undoubtedly members of

the regional council who owe no allegiance to this group, but they are in a weak position. If they consistently criticise the "pro-establishment" views <sup>of</sup> the majority then the "big ten" are likely to exert their influence to ensure that they are not re-elected and do not go to Congress - the latter, a week's holiday by the seaside at the union's expense, being regarded as a privilege to be awarded for good behaviour.

There is some evidence, however, of the existence of a core of disenchanted regional council members. According to two sources, in the 1983 elections for the regional committee two candidates stood against the "status quo" and in their short floor speeches one of them put forward a well-argued case, the other spoke very badly but made clear his irritation with the present system. Both failed to get elected but polled the same number of votes, indicating that there was a hard-core of people who were prepared to vote for change at any cost. Nevertheless, there has been virtually no turnover in the occupation of the region's higher elected posts. The only changes between the 1983-85 and 1985-87 regional committees have been due to the rule change including a BMS section representative and to the death of one member, and, in turn, the 1983-85 regional committee showed only one change from its predecessor, this being due to a member becoming a full-time officer of the union.

The average age upon election of the 1983-85 regional committee was 60, twelve years older than the average of the regional council. Of its eight members only two were in



ordinary employment; four were unemployed or retired; and the remaining two were full-time lay branch secretaries. In all six were branch secretaries<sup>2</sup> and one of the others came from a branch of over 3,000 members staffed by a district officer. At least two of the branch secretaries had as few as 100 members in their branch, however, and owed their position on the regional council and committee to the support of colleagues with larger branches, showing that, even within the regional committee, power is concentrated rather than shared equally between members. Much of this power is in the hands of the regional chairman. The regional chairman is one of the two lay members of the "big ten", he has held this position for well over ten years and has served on the Executive Council of the union continuously since 1972. There have only been three occupants of the region's other seat on the executive during this period.

Despite the lack of turnover, these elections for the region's higher posts are certainly regarded by the participants as being competitive and they devote a lot of energy into fighting them. The only serious rivalry is that which emerges occasionally between key members of the established group, however, rather than any threat from outsiders which is relatively remote. The maintenance of the status quo during the 1980s has essentially revolved around keeping people "sweet" which means, as one regional officer lamented, "it is impossible to get into any of the pubs near regional office at election time because they are full of



regional committee members buying people drinks." It has also involved using certain regional officers as unofficial campaign managers for the ~~key~~ key candidates and, at times, the manipulation of opposition, such as when a member of the regional committee, who was planning to stand against the regional chairman, was chosen for the regional officer's job that he had applied for thereby disqualifying his candidature.

In other words, competition in the regional committee, regional chairman and Executive Council elections in the Birmingham region is not political. It is heavily conditioned by the control exercised by the "big ten" over the regional council elections which ensures that their acolytes are elected. An informal system of social contact and the threat that recalcitrant members will be prevented from going to Congress and removed from the regional council next time is sufficient, in normal circumstances, to keep members "sweet" and minimise opposition to the status quo. On the rare occasions when there are disputes within the "big ten's" grouping, however, other measures are available to control or manipulate opposition. If such opposition does not either carry or split sufficiently the "big ten", it is ultimately bound to fail.

## THE LIVERPOOL, NORTH WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND REGION

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Liverpool, like the Birmingham region, operates a straightforward ballot of all valid nominations in its elections for the regional council and its Congress delegation. It also faces the same common obstacles to membership participation in these elections embodied and derived from the union's rules restricting nominations; allowing only minimal information about candidates; forbidding inter-branch communication; and thereby giving power to those few who know some of the candidates. As these obstacles have already been described in some detail, however, in the Birmingham study they will not be replicated. The section will, instead, focus on the more important question of why, given these powerful common factors, elections in the Liverpool region are, as Tables 5.2 and 5.3 indicated, more competitive than those in the Birmingham region and indeed most other regions.

In the 1983-85 regional council elections in the Liverpool region there were 1.74 candidates for each seat, slightly down on the 1981-83 figures of 1.8 candidates per seat, but still overall making the region the most competitive in the GMWU. The Liverpool region also has had consistently competitive elections for its Congress delegation averaging 2.8 candidates per place in the three delegation elections during 1982-84. Where it was found that in the Birmingham region candidates were rarely defeated and 27 of the region's

44 delegates to the 1984 Congress had attended continuously for the last five years, only two of the Liverpool region's 1984 delegation had regularly attended Congress over this period. Further, only just over half, 20 out of 35, of the Liverpool region's Congress delegation in 1983 went to Congress the following year and, significantly, while six were not nominated again, the remaining nine were, but were defeated. One candidate came eighth in the poll with 33,071 votes in 1983 but only secured 5,811 votes a year later. Another, elected with 26,397 votes in 1983 received a mere 542 the next time.

The competitive nature of both the nomination and balloting processes was confirmed in interviews: it appears that many branches change their Congress nominee regularly, though not necessarily every year, and also have contested votes on which candidates to support. In contrast, other elections have seen varying degrees of competition. There were fifteen candidates for the seven member regional committee in 1981-83, but for the 1983-85 regional committee there were no elections since exactly the required number of candidates were nominated. One of the region's two places on the Executive Council has changed at virtually each of the biennial elections held since 1976, the other was occupied for eight years by one person. Despite these variations, however, the Liverpool region has generally exhibited a clear tendency to replace its leaders that has been completely lacking in the Birmingham region.



The two special distinguishing features of the Liverpool region which have already emerged in this study - its branch structure and its factional political activity - are at the core of explanations for the competitiveness that is found in the region's elections. Surprisingly, given the number of small branches in the Liverpool region, the region's district officers, potentially at least, have a similar opportunity to control elections to the regional council and to Congress as that taken advantage of by the "big ten" in the Birmingham region. While in the Birmingham region district officers have acted as secretaries for a small number of very large branches, exactly the reverse policy has been operated in Liverpool with district officers being used as branch secretaries in a large number of small branches as well as five of the six branches in the Liverpool area with over one thousand members. In Greater Merseyside, which accounts for over three-quarters of the region's total membership, as Table 5.6 shows, in 1984 eight district officers acted as branch secretaries for 144 of the area's 244 branches, accounting for 52 per cent of the membership - four per cent more than the membership covered by Birmingham's "big ten."

The composition of the regional council is obviously affected by the widespread deployment of district officers as branch secretaries. While over half of the 1983-85 regional council in the Birmingham region were branch secretaries in Liverpool they account for less than a third as Table 5.7 shows. Since

the Liverpool region only lists one office currently held on its ballot paper, however, unlike the Birmingham region which lists several, comparisons<sup>2</sup> between Table 5.7 and 5.5 can only be tentative. Nevertheless it is possible to make direct comparisons on the occupational composition of the two regional councils and the two most striking differences are the absence of members from engineering in Liverpool, only one compared with 24 in Birmingham, and the lack of

Table 5.6

LIVERPOOL REGION

Analysis of membership covered by district officers as branch secretaries in Gtr. Merseyside in 1984.

Name	Number of Branches	Size
E. Bannon	10	1,000
J. Beech	15	2,828
M. Egan	22	9,168
E. Gleane	19	3,876
T. Hayes	16	3,056
A. Pritchard	14	1,441
B. Roberts	17	2,599
K. Simpson	31	2,272
Total Branches 59%	<u>144</u>	Membership 52% <u>26,240</u>

SOURCE: Branch Income and Membership Sheets for the period ending December 1984.

unemployed or retired members, only one in Liverpool compared with ten in Birmingham. This latter point again indicating the competitiveness of elections in the Liverpool region. Sixteen of the Liverpool region's 70 regional council members

come from local government, 15 from food and drink, and seven from chemicals, but, those areas apart, regional council membership is extremely occupationally dispersed, with no other industry having more than four members.

Table 5.7

LIVERPOOL REGION

Analysis of 1983-85 regional council by office currently held.

Office held	Number
Branch Secretary	21
Branch Chairman	33
Shop Steward	14
Staff Representative	1
Executive Council Member	1

SOURCE: 1983 Regional Council Ballot Paper

The proportion of the membership in the Liverpool region covered by district officers as branch secretaries certainly warns against simplistic interpretations suggesting that the break-up of large general branches is sufficient to enhance democracy in the GMB, since district officers can still dominate smaller branches through their unrivalled access to knowledge about the candidates standing for election. Indeed, members in smaller branches are arguably less likely to have the knowledge or experience to challenge the views of the full-time officer that shop stewards in large branches



can possess, making the potential for members to acquiesce to the suggestions of the district officer even greater in these branches.

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In practice, however, the situation is somewhat more complicated. As one regional officer commenting on branch structure said: "where there is apathy democracy can break down." In these circumstances, which have been shown to be quite prevalent in the Birmingham region, decisions on who to vote for in the regional council and Congress elections can be taken on the advice of the district officer at a very poorly attended meeting, or taken by him directly - or by the lay branch secretary or chairman if the branch is not staffed by a district officer. Nevertheless, unlike the Birmingham region, in Liverpool it is only in a few isolated cases that district officers or branch secretaries take these decisions themselves. This is because, as the previous chapter noted, the moves towards a more workplace-based branch structure that took place in the 1970s have encouraged greater participation in union affairs in the region.

In essence, therefore, it is not the splitting up of large general branches that ensure competitive elections, it is more that the formation of small, and particularly, workplace branches establishes the basis for increased membership participation in the elections of the regional council and the Congress delegation. Whether this increased participation nourishes democracy, however, depends on the

information available to the membership about the electoral contestants, which, in turn depends on the willingness of district officers to offer disinterested advice and the ability of members to have access to other channels of information. It is this latter point which is crucial if elections are not to be dominated by officers and a few well-informed lay branch secretaries. Democracy is not increased by having a larger number of people attend a branch meeting and blindly support the views of their full-time officer; democracy is about people taking informed decisions - a point which is recognised by the regional secretary, John Whelan, and stressed regularly to members.

The principal official channels through which members can obtain information about candidates is by personal contact at regional council, industrial and equal rights conferences and at Congress. These channels, obviously, are available in all regions and are no guarantee that information will not be narrowly concentrated in a few hands. In the Liverpool region, however, they provide the backcloth for, as one influential lay member put it, "members getting together and exchanging views" and form part of the "informal links" whereby candidates get known. In this sense "informal links" is an euphemism for factional activity. It is the existence of faction which constrains the potential ability of district officers to dominate elections by breaking their monopoly of knowledge about the candidates.

Clear evidence of factional activity in the region has existed since the early 1970s. The changes in the regional council and committee that took place following the Pilkington's dispute, and which produced a transformation of the region's branch structure, were the result of a left-wing faction successfully organising to overthrow the established right-wing hierarchy that had dominated the region throughout the Sixties. This faction has maintained control in the region since by developing its "informal links" at union meetings, political meetings and events and through social contact, enabling its candidates to get known amongst the branches.

Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s it has been strongly opposed by the much better organised Militant tendency,<sup>34</sup> parallelling the political changes in the Labour Party in Liverpool, where the Left succeeded the right-wing policies of the Braddock era<sup>37</sup> and the political battle inside the Party is now exclusively between them and Militant. This congruence between factional activity within the Labour Party and factional activity within the GMWU's structure in the Liverpool region is, needless to say, totally absent in the Birmingham region. In short, where voting in Birmingham is traditionally industry based and heavily dominated by the "big ten", in Liverpool the majority of branches vote on political lines in the regional council and Congress elections.



Despite the constraints on the potential influence of full-time officers in the electoral processes of the Liverpool region, there is clear evidence that, since 1982, district officers have sought to use their positions as branch secretaries to inform the membership that certain candidates standing for election were supporters of the Militant tendency, and have been successful in preventing a number of them from being elected to the regional council and to Congress. The most notable example of this is Ian Lowes, the Militant convenor of Liverpool City Council's powerful Joint Shop Stewards Committee, who was a Congress delegate in 1980 and 1981, but has been prevented from attending since 1982 and failed to get elected to the 1983-85 regional council.

It was this action, weakening the Militant faction's position on the regional council, and Militant's increasing interest in Liverpool City Council, which explains why the 1983-85 regional committee elections were uncontested. Recognising that they were in a minority on the regional council, the Militant faction took a conscious tactical decision not to put up candidates for the regional committee which they knew would not win, but would very likely alienate them from non-Militant GMB members whose vote was needed at meeting of the District Labour Party to control the Council Labour Group. This was Militant's main priority, along with maximising soft and hard left support in the region and in the Party against what they saw as "witch hunts" against Militant members of the Labour Party following its disastrous performance at the

1983 general election.

The region's district officers, apart from taking an anti-Militant stance, do not generally promote the interests of particular candidates in the way that the "big ten" in the Birmingham region do. They do offer advice when asked but in most branches unsolicited advice would be counter-productive. It would produce an unfavourable response from the membership, since many of those attending the meeting will know quite a few of the candidates through the "informal links" that exist and they would resent, perhaps more in Liverpool than anywhere else, being "told what to do." The extent of this dissemination of political information cannot easily be quantified and any assessment can only be impressionistic. It does appear that it is not confined to just a few key lay members and, in fact, is relatively widespread. There can be no doubt participation in regional elections in Liverpool is more horizontally dispersed than it is in the Birmingham region and that this is due to its branch structure encouraging membership attendance, and, more fundamentally, to the existence of factions in the region which contest the elections along political lines, overcoming the information constraints imposed by the union's rules and breaking-up the potential knowledge monopoly of the union's full-time officers.

## THE NORTHERN REGION

The Northern region splits its ballots for the regional council and Congress into divisions rather than operating a simple ballot of all valid nominations. This initiative was introduced into the region by Cunningham over twenty years ago in recognition of the large geographical area that the region covers and, according to officers, to prevent the region being dominated by the bigger branches on Tyneside. Elections for the regional council have four divisions: Durham and Tees; South Tyne and Wear; Northumberland and North Tyneside; and Cumbria; while elections for the region's Congress delegation have seven: Cumbria; Cleveland; Durham; Northumberland; Sunderland; Tyne and Wear; and Bede, covering Jarrow and South Shields. The size of the divisions is determined by the proportion of union members in the area.

Candidates nominated by branches stand for election in their respective geographical divisions, but branches are not limited to voting for their own divisions and can vote for candidates from other areas up to the full requirement. For a region that is extremely active in external politics, in the TUC and the Labour Party, however, the Northern region's internal elections are neither particularly political nor particularly competitive.

Competitive elections for the Northern regional council have only taken place recently. Throughout the membership growth



of the 1960s, and for most of the 1970s, there were always more regional council places than candidates. Although the recruitment climate had changed by 1981, in that year there were still only seven more candidates than seats in the elections for the 110 strong regional council. The 1983-85 elections were more competitive still with 124 candidates for 99 places, but within divisions competition varied and was still far from fierce.

In the Durham and Tees division there were 41 candidates for 33 places; South Tyne and Wear had only five more candidates than the 31 it was allowed; the Northumberland and North Tyneside division was the most competitive having 37 candidates for 25 places; while Cumbria had no elections since there were only ten nominations for twelve places. There has been more competition for places on the regional committee: 22 candidates for ten places in 1981 and 14 candidates for the more normal seven member regional committee in 1983.

From analysis and discussion, however, it is apparent that this competition is not primarily political; although there may be political differences between candidates, in the vast majority of cases, they are nuances rather than substantial and the determining factors are personality, ability and geographical and industrial background, with, historically, the regional committee being centred around members representing local authorities. The lack of political

cleavage has similarly meant that there has been little or no competition for the region's higher posts. The regional chairman has occupied his position virtually unchallenged for well over ten years, while two people served on the Executive Council continually from 1972 to 1980 in one case, and until 1983 in the other.

Elections for the region's Congress delegation have been more competitive than the regional council elections, producing 2.4 candidates per place in 1983, 2.0 in 1984 and 2.3 in 1985, but they have not led to any substantial turnover in the people elected over and above that expected naturally. No less than 46 of the 56 delegates who went to the 1981 Congress had been delegates the year previously, while, despite the change to accommodate the large number of Boilermakers in the region post-amalgamation, nearly half of the region's 1984 delegation, 25 out of 60, had attended Congress for each of the preceeding five years. Furthermore, there is a fundamental overlap between membership of the regional council and attendance at Congress. Of the 60 delegates to Congress in 1984 nearly two-thirds, 37, were members of the 1983-85 regional council with, significantly, all of the top ten in the regional council ballot for the South Tyne and Wear division being elected to Congress, eight out of ten in the Durham and Tees division, and seven out of ten in Northumberland and North Tyneside.

The information presented on the ballot paper in the Northern



region is even more sparse than its Birmingham and Liverpool counterpart. Like both the other regions it includes the date a candidate joined the union, his or her industry and position in the union. It does not, however, include the candidates age, nor does it indicate whether a candidate is unemployed or retired, or a previous member of the regional council. In many instances the candidate's industry is left blank and often so is the date he or she joined the union; and, in common with the Liverpool region, it lists only one union position held. This means that the only information given about some candidates is the branch nominating them.

Analysis of the industrial composition of the regional council and the offices held by its delegates is handicapped by the lack of information on the regional ballot paper but also because of an extensive clearout of files in the region. What evidence is available confirms the strength of members from local authorities and indicates that apart from this it is relatively occupationally dispersed, though since 52 per cent of the region's membership is in general branches the salience of this latter finding is questionable.

More importantly, it is estimated that a very high proportion, around two-thirds, of the regional council are branch secretaries with most of the remainder being branch chairmen. This prevalence of branch secretaries is very similar to that found in the Birmingham region and is at least partly attributable to the fact that the region has



chosen to deploy its district officers on an industrial basis. In stark contrast to Liverpool, where district officers acted as branch secretaries for nearly sixty per cent of the region's branches, the Northern region, apart from around twenty branches in Cumbria, had no district officers acting as branch secretaries. The two regions thus represent the opposite poles of the implementation of a supposedly common union policy.

The Northern region, through not having district officers as branch secretaries, has retained much of the character of the GMW before the introduction of branch administrative officers from 1965, with branch secretaries occupying the key position in the branch as the main channel of branch information, and, as in the Birmingham region, dominating membership of the regional council. The region, therefore, gives some indication of how Decision 84's changes to make all branch secretaries lay members will affect other regions. From interviews in the region, however, it appears that there is a big difference between branch secretaries appointed today and those appointed twenty or more years ago. Where the "old type" full-time lay branch secretaries were very likely to be local councillors and county councillors and, perhaps, also Justices of the Peace, and their union concerns were almost exclusively about getting more cash, the "new type" full-time branch secretaries want power in the region. They may also be councillors, but they tend to look at local government in more political terms than their predecessors and this is

translated into their involvement in union politics. It is not a factional involvement, however, but, as chapter 3 noted, a solidaristic involvement, the product of a recognition that the battle for jobs and economic prosperity has both a political and an industrial dimension, and bears the stamp of Burlison's efforts to give the GMB a higher political profile in the North.

The narrow concentration of power in the hands of branch secretaries as the principal channel of communication with the branch membership, paradoxically, has been reinforced by the network of quarterly area branch secretary and chairs meetings that Burlison has introduced in to the region since 1978. Although this reform has undoubtedly been successful in improving communications within the region, by privileging secretaries and chairs it has also had the effect of making them into a lay elite, strengthening their position vis-a-vis the membership. By virtue of their position, therefore, the secretary tends to be regarded as the branches "expert" and the natural person to represent them on the regional council and at Congress.

In the absence of political factions providing information about the candidates, the branch secretary, as the resident expert, is also a highly influential figure in deciding which candidates the branch will support. Within a branches electoral division this influence is not so important as a number of branch members may know candidates through inter-



workplace union activity, involvement with area recruitment teams, and membership of the district and county Labour party. The secretary and branch chairman, however, by attending the quarterly area meetings with the regional secretary and officers, meet the widest body of lay activists and hence are better informed about candidates. Ordinary branch members are likely to know something about one or two of the candidates standing in the other electoral divisions if they read the region's journal "Focus North", but, that apart, they are likely to know nothing more than the bare details provided by the ballot paper. In these circumstances, a respected branch secretary putting in a "good word" for a particular candidate is virtually assured of getting the branches support, even though some branches are noticeably more reluctant in voting for candidates from other divisions.

The specialised knowledge that branch secretaries possess concerning candidates in regional elections is derived not only from personal experience, through attendance at meetings, but also from the personal recommendation of the region's officers. Despite not holding formal branch office, the region's officers nevertheless play a crucial role in the elections. Regional and district officers were quite open about this role. The rodomontade of one was that "we as officers decide who is going to get on the regional council." Another declared confidentially that officers had "more control than you could ever imagine" over the region's



elections. Certainly the close contact that exists between a number of officers and branch secretaries through the three-monthly consultative meetings, in normal officer-branch industrial dealings, through attendance at other GMB, TUC and Labour part meetings, and through personal social contact gives ample opportunities for officers to make their preferences for particular candidates known. Put differently, it is not unrealistic to suggest that certain branch secretaries in the Northern region have been "incorporated" into the officer bureaucracy.<sup>30</sup> The power that officers and lay branch secretaries wield in the regional elections, therefore, is substantial and, in an occupationally diverse region with over half of the membership in general branches, easily outweighs in importance the tendency for branches to vote on industrial lines.

The influence of officers is also apparent in the elections of the regional committee. As has been noted earlier, this traditionally has had ten members and although, in theory, it reverted to the normal rule book figure of seven in 1983, in fact, there are still ten members as the region elects seven members in addition to a regional chairman and two Executive Council members. Four of these were elected because, according to one regional industrial organiser (and there is no reason to doubt his word) he promised he would "get them on." Undoubtedly, the opinions of the full-time officers concerning the capabilities of regional committee candidates,

and they are not reticent in expressing them, do have a strong influence in these elections, but there are other factors at work. Three are particularly apparent.

Firstly, there is the tendency, noted earlier in the section, for local government delegates to vote for nominees from the same sector. Second, there is the geographical factor, with delegates supporting candidates from their own division, especially apparent in the case of Sunderland delegates voting for their local candidates. Third, there is the fact that five of the ten regional committee members come from branches with over one thousand members; three of them from the three largest branches in the region, the other two from slightly smaller but mutually supporting general branches in the same town. This indicates that there may be similar processes of controlling regional council membership to maximise support in the regional committee elections to those operating in the Birmingham region. The Northern region, therefore, notwithstanding its very different officer structure to the Birmingham region and its lack of very large branches facilitating the concentration of power, has evolved an informal grouping of officers and key lay members which, though not as extensive, nor probably quite as effective as that centred around the "big ten", is nonetheless comparable.

The main themes and arguments emerging from the examination of elections in the three study regions should be now relatively clear. Rather than recapitulating them at this



point they will be summarised in the concluding comments at the end of this chapter. Before that, however, to offer a complete analysis, it is necessary to return to an area already touched on, but not sufficiently explored: the way that decisions on non-bargaining issues are made in regions.

### The constraints on the power of regional secretaries

Decision-making processes within the GMB's regions are regulated by the union's rule book which, it will be remembered from earlier in the chapter, formally give ultimate authority to the regional council, but effectively gives power to the regional secretary. Having already outlined these functions and responsibilities and examined the organisational dynamics behind the composition of regional committees, it is the dynamics of the decision-making involving the relationship between the regional committee and the regional secretary, which is now discussed.

The conventional wisdom on the relationship between regional secretaries and regional committees is over thirty years old.

Summarising its argument:

"The regional secretary wields very great power within his region. He is in sole charge of the day-to-day running of business and of the regional officers and regional office...

It is through him that the committee receives most of the information on which to base its decisions. If he is a powerful personality, or a clever handler of men,



he should not find it difficult to carry his committee ... with him.

Only in exceptional circumstances will the regional secretary lack the support of his district. The regional committee or council are unlikely to succeed in a dispute with their secretary."<sup>39</sup>

The argument is slightly qualified by noting that regional secretaries are not "absolute masters" within their regions, citing the 1940 case in the Birmingham region where the regional committee suspended its regional secretary. However, this is regarded as exceptional and the argument is more or less re-stated:

"in more normal times there must be give and take between the regional secretary and his committee. For although they are unlikely to succeed in a dispute with him, his power in the union will be sadly reduced if he has not their support."<sup>40</sup>

A fresh examination of this conventional wisdom is long overdue given the changes in British society and in the GMBs organisation that have occurred in the period since it was first adumbrated.

The fact that the regional secretary is in charge of the day-to-day running of the region and its officers is not in dispute. What is at issue is who makes the key decisions in the region. The image of the regional secretary as a nearly all-powerful regional "baron" does not bear much relevance to the way that decisions are reached in the GMB's regions in the 1980s.

Three sets of key decisions delineate some of the major variations in the decision-making process. Since they have already been examined in this and the previous chapter they need only be commented on briefly to reinforce the argument being developed. Chronologically, they are the splitting up of large branches and the involvement of shop stewards in recruitment in the Northern region in the 1960s; the post-Pilkington's changes in branch structure and policies in the Liverpool region; and, again in the Northern region, the high profile image, recruitment organisation, and branch chair and secretary area meetings instituted since 1978.

The first is an old-fashioned case of autocratic decision-making. The second an example of a regional committee forcing through major strategic policy changes. The last is an instance of consensual decision-making, with the regional committee fully supporting the change ideas coming from a new and energetic regional secretary. Allied to these sets of decisions, the principal case of non-decision making, the absence of change in the Birmingham region, is also an example of the power of the regional committee. The argument emerging very clearly from close analysis of the regions is that regional secretaries do not have the power in the GMB today that they had over twenty years ago. Modern regional committees are far more likely to demand to play a full role in decision-making than their predecessors. The regional secretary has a power to persuade but not to dictate and in cases of dispute with the regional committee it is likely to



be the latter who succeeds.

In many ways the relationship between the regional secretary and the regional committee in the GMB today can be likened to that between a chief officer and a council committee. It is the elected members who determined the overall policy and the officer who is in charge of its implementation. This distinction has, of course, always been factitious, since policy formulation and policy implementation are not inevitably separable; nevertheless it has a verisimilitude which cannot be easily ignored. John Whelan, the current Liverpool regional secretary, summed up the way decisions are reached in his region by saying that members of the regional committee "prefer debate and discussion to being told what to do." He sees his role as providing the regional committee with information so that they can make an informed decision on issues, which he will then implement in the region. In any event, such is the level of political activism in the region and on the regional committee, that a less enlightened regional secretary who sought to take policy decisions would quickly find his position untenable. In this respect the Northern region is not very different. While it does not have the political factionalism of the Liverpool region and has a regional committee and regional secretary which are like-minded on most issues, the regional secretary would no more think of riding roughshod over the wishes of the regional committee than his counterpart in Liverpool. Tom Burlison, as a highly regarded regional secretary, is in a



very strong position, but he has to argue his case, with the regional committee being the final arbiter.

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Regional committees, if they function properly, are the body where the important decisions on non-bargaining issues in the region are taken. But they need the type of factional activity or level of union activism found in the Liverpool or Northern regions to be effective. In the Birmingham region their absence has led to the atrophy of many of its functions, reducing decision-making to becoming virtually a trial of strength between the regional secretary and regional chairman. The regional chairman in the Birmingham region is in a stronger position than chairmen in other regions. Where both the Northern and Liverpool regions have a regional chairman, two Executive Council members as ex-officio members and seven other members of the regional committee making its size effectively ten, the Birmingham regional chairman is also a member of the Executive Council. The other Executive Council member is one of the seven regional committee members and, along with others, owes his position there to the block votes of the regional chairman's branch and those of his colleagues in the "big ten". It should not be thought, however, that there is continual friction between the regional chairman and secretary. In general, the regional chairman is not interested in getting involved in the detailed running of the region and the regional secretary is allowed free rein to take decisions unencumbered by a vigilant regional committee. In cases where the regional

chairman and secretary differ, however, it is the regional chairman who is most likely to win.

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The process by which the three regions nominate GMB candidates for constituency Labour party selection as Parliamentary candidates highlights the differences in interest, activity and decision-making processes found in the union. In the Northern region, the regional committee decides who will be the GMB's nominee for each parliamentary constituency and informs the appropriate branches. There is no dispute. Branches accept that the regional committee has the authority to take such decisions. The regional committee may take advice from a number of sources, but it is clear that it is the body that takes the ultimate decision.

The Liverpool regional committee also decides who will be the GMB nominee in certain constituencies, but the political factions that exist in the region mean that this decision is not enforceable and, in particular, Militant branches decide independently who they will support. In the Birmingham region such is the lack of interest and activism of the regional committee that the decision on who to nominate is taken, if at all, by a full-time officer charged with the responsibility of increasing the level of political activity in the region. The only time in recent years that at least some regional committee members have been involved in deciding who to support in a parliamentary selection was in 1985 over the re-selection of a sitting MP and brought the



region damaging national and regional publicity.

National newspaper reports<sup>41</sup> that Jean Gilbert, "a London-based interior designer" and the wife of Dr John Gilbert, the Labour MP for Dudley East, had been nominated to the General Management Committee of the local constituency party, very shortly due to go through the parliamentary selection process, by "the quarry workers branch of the GMB" was only the most prominent example of the union's involvement. Local papers<sup>42</sup> reported, largely accurately, and in more graphic detail how the GMB and two other unions, the TGWU and EETPU, in a little over a week had appointed 36 fresh delegates to the crucial selection body. Four GMB branches were involved: two who were already affiliated to the constituency, but had not appointed delegates for a number of years, and two who newly affiliated. The Brierley Hill No 67 branch, although originally a quarry workers branch is now one of the largest branches in the region and its secretary, Neville Hough, is the regional chairman. Apart from the MP's wife, it appointed four other delegates, two allegedly recruited to the union at the MP's surgery the previous weekend, and one who did not even live in the constituency. The Coseley No 94 branch also appointed a delegate, their branch secretary, who did not live in the constituency and who, when interviewed, admitted that the first he had heard of his nomination was when he read his name in the local paper. Three other delegates were appointed all with less than twelve months union membership. The Dudley Electricity branch, despite its



branch secretary being a member of the regional committee and soon to be elected to the Executive Council, was not affiliated to the constituency and in doing so for the first time nominated the secretary and his wife plus another as delegates. Lastly, the No 133 Hotel and Catering branch also decided to affiliate and nominated two delegates: one a deputy headmistress in Wolverhampton and the President of Wolverhampton NUT; the other not a Labour party member and, therefore, ineligible.

The constituency executive, suspicious of the validity of many of the new delegates, refused to recognise them and the local party did not meet for nearly six months in the middle of 1985 while, supported by the two neighbouring constituency parties and the Dudley Trades Council, they called for a national Labour party investigation into the alleged "packing" of the meeting by the new delegates from the three unions. Concerned that they would not get a fair hearing, since Neville Hough, the Brierley Hill branch secretary, in addition to being regional chairman, was also the GMB's representative on the Labour Party National Executive and the current chairman of the party, they lobbied the party conference. The following month's NEC, however, somewhat ungrammatically, ruled that:

"Provided the individuals are members of the body appointing them and there is written confirmation from a responsible officer of that organisation that the delegate has been properly appointed on behalf of the affiliated branch. The Labour Party cannot question whether an individual member fulfils the requirements of

the Rules of an affiliated Trade Union to be a member of that Trade Union nor to question the authority of the responsible officers of that organisation to confirm that an individual is a properly appointed delegate from that organisation."<sup>43</sup>

This pronouncement effectively ended the dispute since none of the unions were prepared to break ranks and admit that there might have been some irregularities in the way they had appointed delegates. All of them assured the NEC that their rules had been strictly followed. The GMB, therefore, despite glaring breaches in its rules and procedures, was able to bluff it out successfully.

The decision to get involved in the Dudley East selection was taken following a direct request for assistance by the sitting MP to the union's regional office. This was referred by the regional secretary to the regional chairman who took the decision alone. The regional committee were not consulted. Implementation was left to a full-time officer who allocated delegates to branches from a list provided by the MP. It appears that two branch secretaries were contacted to see whether they thought their branch would mind affiliating and sending delegates; and, as has been noted, one branch secretary was not informed. None of branches held meetings to appoint delegates before the list was sent in from the regional office and, although all of them met subsequently and ratified the decisions taken on their behalf, in at least one case, they did so only after a very acrimonious debate.



The Birmingham region's actions in the John Gilbert affair show not only the extent to which an apathetic membership and a disinterested regional <sup>&</sup>committee can have decisions taken for them, they also highlight the power of the regional chairman. It was he, not the regional secretary, who took the final decision. While, to some extent, this is understandable, given the fact that his participation was required in the enterprise, it is also an indication of his considerable influence. Two recent decisions, emerging from follow-up interviews, where the regional secretary and chairman had different opinions, make this point even more forcibly. Both involve the appointment of full-time officers where it might be expected that the views of the regional secretary, as the person charged with the responsibility under rule of managing the region's officers, would be the determining factor.

The first revolved around the appointment in 1986 of the region's two regional industrial officers as a result of Decision 84's changes. These are important posts, involving managing the region's organisers and deputising for the regional secretary in his absence. While both the regional secretary and chairman agreed on the suitability of one person for these posts, dispute centred on the other with the regional chairman's nominee being appointed by the regional committee. The second case concerns the most recent organiser appointment and here disagreement crystallised around the regional secretary supporting a woman candidate -



there are no women organisers in the region - and the regional chairman advocating appointing the region's education officer. The regional committee, which meets fortnightly, was deadlocked for three months over the appointment, until, finally, the person favoured by the regional chairman was appointed.

The fierceness of this battle is indicative of the mutual antipathy that exists between the regional chairman and secretary and shows that the regional chairman cannot easily get his way, but he is likely to succeed because, in most cases, he can rely on the support of a nucleus of regional committee members who owe their place to him. It, moreover, reinforces the general point that the power a regional secretary has is the power to persuade the regional committee to adopt a particular course of action not the power to dictate. Where regional committees are active debating forums this is patently obvious, but it is true of even relatively ineffective committees. The days when the Birmingham regional secretary could buy five thousand shares in a local radio station without asking the regional committee's permission have long gone.

### Conclusion

The GMB's highly regionalised structure is unique amongst British trade unions. Although many other unions have a

regional tier of government or its equivalent, only the autonomy given to the NUM's areas even begins to approach the power that the GMB's regions wield within the union and its electoral processes and highly factional politics are very different from the GMB.<sup>44</sup> While the GMB's great rival, the TGWU, appoints its officers at national level and has direct contact with its branches through the union's trade group structure, in the GMB officers are appointed by the regions which are the sole formal means of communication with the branch. Regional power is further consolidated by the division of representation on the Executive Council and at Congress into regions and the formidable rule book provisions which give the region almost absolute authority over the branch.

The vertical concentration of power at the regional level in the GMB on non-bargaining issues has been widely recognised and is nothing new. What is not generally appreciated, however, is the significant variations that exist between the GMB's regions. Most academic and journalistic references to the GMB's regions, wrongly, seem to imply that they are identical monolithic institutions ruled by an all-powerful regional baron and even those studies which do recognise regional differences attribute them solely to the actions of the regional secretary.<sup>53</sup> The previous chapter showed the three study regions had very different branch structures and noted how the impetus for the changes which developed a more workplace-based branch structure in the Liverpool region came



through the region's democratic structure and were initiated by the regional committee, not the regional secretary.

2.

This chapter further strongly refutes the view that regional secretaries dominate their regions. The evidence is that decision-making at the regional level, far from being concentrated solely in the hands of the regional secretary is, in fact, dispersed across the regional committee which is the body that takes the key decisions in the region, not the regional council despite its de jure authority. As the region's administrator the regional secretary's views can be highly influential, but, in the GMB today, a regional secretary's power is the power to persuade not the power to dictate.

The principal way in which the membership can participate in the government of the region and the formation of union policy on non-bargaining issues is through the union's electoral system, most notably through nominating and electing delegates to the regional council and to Congress. Although the regional council is not, in itself, a particularly important decision-making body, its composition and hence its election is important in that it is the body that elects the regional committee and the region's representatives on the Executive Council. The only other elections held relatively regularly in the regions, the confirmatory elections of regional organisers, have nothing more than ceremonial value since no official candidate has



ever come remotely close to being defeated throughout the union's entire history.

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The GMB's rules and electoral system heavily condition membership participation in regional decision-making. The focus of voting in the GMB has traditionally been the branch, rather than the individual, with the union using the branch block vote system. This method of voting, casting the total branch membership according to the decisions reached at the branch meeting, emphasises the importance of regional variations in branch structure. Potentially, at least, the branch block vote system gives a disproportionate influence to activists in large general branches; for instance, over one quarter of the Birmingham region's membership is contained in just five general branches, which, as the previous chapter showed, are likely to be less well-attended than company or one-industry branches. The union's rules, in theory, mitigate this by stipulating that each branch, regardless of size, may nominate only one delegate to the regional council and one to Congress. By also forbidding inter-branch communication, preventing candidates from making personal statements or members attending branches other than their own, however, they ensure that branch members are likely to know nothing more about the candidates in these elections than the minimal information provided on the ballot paper.

The formidable rule book obstacles to branch members taking

informed decisions on which candidates to support reinforce membership apathy: a number of those interviewed expressed the view that it was pointless voting for candidates they did not know and would not ever meet: but they also strengthen the position of those, principally the branch secretaries and the full-time officers, who do know some of the candidates. The aphorism "knowledge is power" is particularly pertinent to the GMB's electoral system. It is interesting, therefore, to find that within the rigid framework set by the union's rules electoral competition varies greatly between regions.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s many regions frequently had more places than candidates for the regional council making ballots unnecessary as regional councils, by rule comprising one delegate for every one thousand members, expanded in size with the growth in union membership during most of this period. These elections have become more competitive as regional councils have reduced in size following membership losses since 1979, but even so the most competitive region had only 1.79 candidates per seat for its 1983-85 regional council and two regions had more seats than candidates. Congress delegation elections, with a narrower representational basis, one delegate for two thousand members, have been correspondingly more competitive with, in 1984, all but one of the GMB's ten regions having more than two candidates per place and three regions having over three times as many candidates as places. The level of competition for places on the regional council was very similar in the



Birmingham and Northern regions, but dramatically different in the Liverpool region which, along with Scotland, has the most competitive regional <sup>&-</sup>council elections in the GMB.

The research found that in the Birmingham and Northern regions the influence of officers in the regional council elections was extensive. In the Birmingham region there was clear evidence that the region's eight district and branch administrative officers with branch secretary responsibilities acted together with the region's two principal full-time lay branch secretaries to ensure that the candidates they supported were elected. Between them these "big ten" branch secretaries control around 48 per cent of the regions membership and form the core of an organised group, best seen as a loose alliance of personal friends and like-minded individuals whose purpose is not political, but to maintain their existing positions, making them essentially a part of the bureaucracy rather than a faction opposing it. Facilitated by membership apathy, they have been able to do this so successfully that that is very little turnover of the regional council or Congress delegation from one period to another.

The Northern region in contrast to Birmingham does not have its very large branches; has virtually no district officers as branch secretaries; is much more politically active; and splits its regional council ballot into five geographical divisions rather than holding a straightforward ballot of all



validly nominated persons. Nevertheless, it has evolved an informal grouping of officers and key lay members which, though not as extensive or as effective in elections, is certainly comparable with the group centred around the "big ten." Two factors have made this possible: the fact that the Northern region has a better system of official internal communication than any other region, through its newspaper, area branch secretaries and chairs meetings, and strong officer links at the workplace; and the tradition of solidaristic political activism that is common in the North and has been assiduously fostered in the region. Together these factors enable the views of the union's officers to be easily heard and, as respected opinion formers, in the absence of political cleavage they are likely to be accepted, particularly by the branch secretaries who play a key role in the elections.

The fieldwork in the Liverpool region clearly demonstrates that its highly competitive elections are the product of the region's branch structure and the factional political activity within the union on Merseyside. While the Liverpool region's workplace-based branch structure avoids the possibility of a small number of large general branches dominating regional elections through their block votes, the widespread deployment of district officers as branch secretaries in Greater Merseyside, (they average eighteen branches each and account for 52 per cent of the membership), means that the potential for officer influence is still

there. It is, however, dispersed under this branch structure, which, as the previous chapter showed, also encourages greater membership participation. In itself, this is no guarantee that members, rather than officers, will effectively take the decisions on which candidates to support. What is important is the membership's access to information about the contestants and it is here that the region's factional activity exercises a crucial influence, with the GMB's representational structure being used as a backcloth for members getting together and exchanging views.

Factional activity in the GMB has mirrored the factional activity taking place in the Liverpool Labour party, with the left taking power in the early 1970s from the machine politics of the right and Militant taking over as the main opposition to them since the mid 1970s. Both factions ensure that their supporters know who to vote for, the former by "informal links" at union meetings, political meetings and events and social contact, the latter through their highly disciplined organisation. Consequently, the scope for officer influence in regional elections is much reduced.

There is evidence that since 1982 some officers have actively pointed out to their branches that certain candidates are Militant supporters, successfully preventing their election, but, in a highly politically active region, officer interference tends to be resented by the membership and is rarely contemplated. Membership participation in deciding the composition of the regional council is, therefore, more



dispersed in the Liverpool region than it is in the Northern region and far more dispersed than in the Birmingham region.

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Analysis of the Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions both confirms and suggests modifications to the conclusions of a recent study of ballots in number of unions, including the GMB. It found:

"The GMWU's elections are, apart from one or two regions, free of organized political activity associated in other unions with right and left-wing groups. It is rather that activists are elected because they have proved themselves in particular roles or that it is 'their turn' to be elected to council or the executive. In this process the local full-time officers influence over which candidates should or should not be supported is extensive. Those who 'rock the boat' are liable to be dropped next time round or opposed by someone more in tune with the values prized in the traditionally moderate GMWU." 45

From the research in the three study regions, and drawing from knowledge of other GMB regions, there can be no doubt that the organised political activity of the Liverpool region is very much an exception. The research also strongly confirms the influence that officers, though not necessarily local full-time officers, have over the electoral process, offering fresh insights on its extent and variation. It further indicates that it is perhaps overgenerous to suggest that activists are elected because they have "proved" themselves. Branch secretaries are not disinterested parties, many of them want to be elected to the regional council and committee, and they will use their influence with



the region's full-time officers and other branch secretaries to ensure that they get support. Of course, ability does have some relevance in deciding who officers choose to support but "voting the right way" is much more important. The Birmingham study showed that if the district officers were "talent spotters" they were very bad at their job indeed, but if their job was to select people who, when nudged, voted the right way, their expertise could not be faulted.

The extensive control of the regional council elections in the Birmingham region has enabled the regional chairman, one of the "big ten," to ensure that people who owe their allegiance to him are elected to the regional committee, which, coupled with the fact that the region does not split the offices of regional chairman and Executive Council member, has concentrated power even further. While the Liverpool and Northern regions have strong regional chairmen, they also have active regional committees, whose members are more or less equals, and decisions are reached collectively through debate and discussion in which the regional secretary, as has been noted, has the power to persuade not to dictate. The recent appointment by the London regional committee of a new regional secretary with a long history of "rocking the boat" is another example of their power. In the Birmingham region, however, the power of the regional committee is virtually concentrated in the hands of one person and, in cases of disagreement with the regional secretary it is

likely to be the regional chairman who succeeds.

In concluding, it is suggested<sup>2</sup> that four factors are particularly relevant to democratic involvement in decision-making in trade unions on non-bargaining issues at the regional or equivalent level: constitutional provisions; branch structure; factionalism; and political activity. Recognising the importance of the union's rules is redolent of the approach taken to trade union democracy in the Fifties,<sup>44</sup> but it is inescapable. The GMB's rules ensure that the key posts in the region, the regional chairman, Executive Council delegates and regional committee are all indirectly elected, and officially allow only minimal information to be provided about regional council candidates, not to mention stipulating that the increasingly indefensible branch block vote system is to be used in these elections. As an aside, an interesting area for future study will be the changes imposed by the 1984 Trade Union Act forcing the union to elect its Executive Council, including the regional secretaries, by individual workplace ballot. Significantly, it has been decided that candidates in these elections can issue personal statements which is definitely a step in the right direction. It is a pity, however, that the GMB did not grasp this opportunity for change and decide to directly elect its regional chairmen and regional committees by similar means.

Branch structure is relevant to involvement in decision-



making in two ways. First, it affects the level of participation at branch meetings; as the previous chapter established, workplace branches<sup>2</sup> are likely to be better attended than general branches. Second, in trade unions operating the branch block vote system, the existence of large branches means that power can be concentrated in a few branches if they decide to act in concert. The existence of faction is also important in that it constrains the influence of the union's officers in the electoral process and, particularly where a union's rules forbid canvassing or the issuing of manifestoes, it provides an unofficial communication channel to the membership, preventing one group of people establishing a knowledge monopoly, and enabling them to reach informed decisions. Lastly, in the absence of factionalism, it is suggested that political activity produces a reverse interest in union activity: members involved in democratic politics are more likely to perceive the need for democratic involvement in trade unions, and have the procedural and committee skills to carry this through, than non-politically involved members.

Having outlined the substantial regional differences which exist between the three study regions on the dispersal of decision-making on non-bargaining issues, the focus is now switched to describing and analysing membership participation in collective bargaining.



MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Discussion and analysis of the GMB's organisation up to now has touched on its industrial organisation only tangentially, principally when referring to the union's officer structure. While this approach has been justified in terms of the importance and comparative neglect of the internal government of trade unions, it has always been recognised that the primary purpose of trade unions is to improve materially the wages and conditions of its members. Certainly, this is all some members are concerned about and any study of union democracy which fails to examine membership involvement in industry would be fatally flawed.

The academic context for this chapter is the voluminous post-Donovan literature on the workplace; its specific focus is the often neglected relationship between workplace and union.<sup>1</sup> The chapter has two further limitations of focus. In examining decision-making on industrial issues the focus is on membership involvement in determining industrial policy and strategy not on the power relations between the GMB and different employers. Similarly, although general comments can be made, a detailed study of decision-making in all the industries which the GMB organise is well beyond the scope of this study and is not attempted. In consequence, research has focused principally on local government, as one of the

GMB's traditional strengths, and on private manufacturing, though information is provided on other sectors where it is available. In the case of local government, information has proved to be particularly rich and its treatment is correspondingly lengthier.

Since the 1936 reorganisation the GMB's industrial organisation has revolved around national officers, appointed with responsibilities for one or more industries, depending on the scale of the union's membership, and officers appointed by the region on similar industrial lines.<sup>2</sup> The traditional practice embodied national officers negotiating pay at industry level and regional officers keeping the membership informed of developments in collective bargaining. It was this model of industrial organisation that was carried on by the union in the post-war period.

While the existence of shop stewards was formally recognised in the union's rules in 1951,<sup>3</sup> in common with many other trade unions, no attempt was made to integrate them into the union's decision-making structure on bargaining issues.

Indeed, under successive general secretaries the union gained a reputation for being hostile to shop-floor involvement and for treating members as clients rather than participants, with union officers often signing agreements with employers over the heads of its members.

This high-handed approach of allowing officers to make their

own judgements without consulting the membership led to the union signing an agreement with Ilfords, the photographic suppliers, in 1965 which, in effect, meant that unofficial strikers would be sacked with the union's blessing. In addition the agreement bore many of the hallmarks of recent single union deals.<sup>4</sup> The union's wholly unsympathetic attitude to industrial action and its refusal to recognise workplace industrial organisation was most apparent in the engineering industry, where the opposition of the GMW's national officer, Jim Matthews, to membership demands was almost legendary, and, as has been noted previously, it was epitomised in the union's refusal to make the 1969 Ford strike official, isolating it from other unions and leading to 1300 members, including twenty-five shop stewards, leaving the union in disgust to join the TGWU.<sup>5</sup>

The strike at Pilkingtons and the shock-waves it sent through the union, therefore, was the most important, but not the only, expression of membership pressure on the official union structure. This pressure was not confined to the GMB,<sup>6</sup> though its officers' attitudes exacerbated the problem. It was the product of two developments: the growth of shop steward organisation, and the growth of workplace bargaining, characterised in the Donovan Commission's "two systems" analysis as "largely informal, largely fragmented and largely autonomous." Donovan was reporting at a time of flux and there have been significant changes in the bargaining structure since then. By 1978, it was estimated that for



two-thirds of manual employees and three-quarters of non-manual employees the principal means of fixing pay was through single employer agreements.<sup>7</sup>

While the TGWU, under the leadership of Jack Jones, responded to these changes by decentralising collective bargaining, involving shop stewards directly in negotiations and encouraging the use of reference back procedures,<sup>8</sup> and NUPE fundamentally changed its structure to integrate its rapidly expanding shop steward organisation,<sup>9</sup> the GMWU's response was to follow the Donovan recommendation of increasing the number of full-time officers dealing directly with the shop floor. In taking this decision it was heavily influenced by Hugh Clegg, one of the report's authors and the union's official historian, who, in a commissioned study on the workload of officers, strongly recommended the introduction of a new district officer grade in 1972.

It is apposite at this point to make some initial comments on the relevance to this study of the other major development of the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of shop steward organisation, since it has been variously described as approximating to a model of "direct democracy"<sup>10</sup> and having "promoted democracy."<sup>11</sup> The growth in shop stewards is not in dispute, although it is notoriously difficult to produce reliable estimates: in 1961 a survey put the number at 90,000 though it admitted that the figure was "no better than a guess,"<sup>12</sup> seven years later a study for the Donovan Commission, more

reliably, put the figure at 175,000,<sup>13</sup> while in 1978 it was estimated that there were 156,000 stewards in manufacturing industry alone,<sup>14</sup> with growth being even more rapid in the public sector.<sup>15</sup>

What is at issue is first, the implication in Donovan and other studies that shop stewards are fully accountable representatives of the members who can have regular and easy access to them; and second, the assumption that shop stewards are involved in collective bargaining. The majority of studies which have led to these views have, rightly, been criticised for concentrating on private manufacturing, especially the engineering sector, and on medium and large factories and the exportability of their conclusions to other sectors, particularly local government, has been challenged.<sup>16</sup> These two areas of disagreement in the literature will be examined later.

The chapter is structured in two parts, divided roughly into the GMB's formal system of industrial organisation, its officer and industrial conference structure; and the informal system as it operates in local government and private manufacturing. Concluding remarks follow.

### Change in the GMB's formal organisation

The election of David Basnett as general secretary, widely regarded as being the candidate for change, provided the

leadership and enthusiasm, previously lacking, that was necessary to give fresh impetus to membership demands for changes in the union's attitudes to strikes and for greater lay involvement industrial organisation. The contrast in attitudes between Cooper, who had supported "In Place of Strife" and wanted the union to register under the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, and Basnett, who as the national officer for the glass industry had witnessed the Pilkingtons strike at first hand, cannot be overstated. Basnett was able to use the authority and goodwill his election had given him to transform the GMB's anti-strike image, making it clear that the union was not implacably opposed to industrial action in every circumstance - a task made easier by the formal concentration of power at national level over disputes.

The union's rules provide that the conduct of trade disputes is vested in the Executive Council<sup>17</sup> who must give permission for all major strikes to be called: "in no case shall a cessation of work be threatened or take place without the sanction of the regional committee or the GMW Executive Council:" with regional committees having the power to sanction strikes where not more than 300 members are involved.<sup>18</sup> The rule book explicitly lays down the procedures to be followed.

" Should any Branch or body of members of the Union desire steps to be taken for an advance in wages or improved conditions of employment, the Branch Secretary shall report the claim to the Regional Secretary ... who



shall forward the same to the GMW Executive Council... With respect to those on whose behalf the claim is being preferred, there shall be stated, on the form provided, the number of members entitled and not entitled to benefit, the number of non-members, if any, and also the number of votes recorded by the branch, or body for and against the claim."<sup>19</sup>

The union's rules also give the Executive Council the power to refer disputes to arbitration and stipulate voting requirements.

" No cessation of work shall take place unless two-thirds of the members belonging to the Branch or body immediately concerned, shall have voted in favour of the adoption of such a course, and then only with the express sanction of the Central Executive Council and after legal notice to terminate contracts of service has been given. Every member affected shall have an opportunity of recording his vote at a special meeting, for and against handing in notice to cease work. In no case shall members be entitled to strike benefit if they enter upon a strike without the sanction of the Central Executive Council."<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, the rule book legislates for a strike committee not exceeding nine to be elected by the members involved, but specifies that it shall be subject to the authority of the regional committee or the Executive Council or regional officials, and clearly states that "it shall not, without due instructions, authorise any action on questions of law, policy or the methods to be followed in relation to the dispute."

Rules also provide that where a dispute occurs over an area and affects a number of branches the regional committee has the power to appoint strike committees as necessary.<sup>21</sup> The constitutional position in the GMB importantly, therefore,

gives total authority over both the decision to strike and the way that strikes are conducted to regional committees, in cases where less than 300 members are involved, and to the Executive Council in larger disputes. In determining whether to sanction a strike within a particular region, the opinions of the regional secretary and the region's other Executive Council members carry great weight. The general secretary, however, particularly a newly elected one, still has a strong influence and can set the tone by which disputes are judged.

National leadership has also been crucial to changes that have been introduced in the GMB's industrial organisation, but since these policy changes have depended on regional secretaries and regional committees for implementation their nature and effectiveness has varied widely. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the case of officer structure which shows the importance of policy implementation as well as policy formulation and highlights the limits imposed on national decision-making in a highly regionalised trade union.

#### Officer structure reforms

So far the GMB's officers have been frequently mentioned but no attempt has been made at definitional precision. As a pioneering study noted, there is

"no accepted definition of a full-time trade union officer. The term is not synonymous with 'trade union employee,' still less with 'fully employed on trade



union work.' A trade union typist is clearly not a trade union officer, but the line between officers and 'staff' or 'clerks' is variously drawn by different unions."<sup>22</sup>

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This study uses the definition adopted by the GMB: officers are defined as those either elected or appointed by the Executive Council or regional committees, the general secretary and national officers, regional secretary and regional, district and branch administrative officers. Staff are those appointed by the general secretary or the regional secretaries to deal with research, legal work, education, administrative and clerical work and specialist services. From 1969 these specialist services have grown with, at various points, separate national departments being created for productivity services, pensions, and health and safety, which, following a 1976 Congress resolution, have been mirrored by specialist staff in the regions. It is recognised that this definition would be unacceptable if data were being compiled for comparative statistical purposes on the ratio of full-time officers to members, but since this is not attempted it is unnecessary to complicate matters further.

Very few academic studies have focused on the background and training of trade union officers; some brief points can, however, be made to provide a context for the following discussion. Published research in the early 1970s found that compared with the previous decade "trade union officers appear to being appointed younger and with better basic



education,"<sup>23</sup> and that the GMB "appears to provide the most training,"<sup>24</sup> with a survey at a similar time finding "a sprinkling of graduates"<sup>25</sup> at the union's national level. In the decade since that trend has continued and has been extended to the regional level. John Edmonds, who was educated at Oxford, is the most notable example, but a number of graduates have been appointed as staff at national level in the union's research department and innovative regional secretaries have appointed graduates to posts in education, research, health and safety and legal work, with some of them eventually transferring to industrial negotiating jobs within the region. While a large majority of the union's officers have served their union "apprenticeship," most commonly beginning as shop stewards, the GMB has been exceptional among the manual unions in being prepared to appoint staff to key posts from outside the ranks of its members.

The GMB's national officer organisation has hardly changed over the last twenty years. The changes in officer structure that have occurred since 1965 have been concerned exclusively with the officer level directly in contact with the membership. The reasons given for the introduction of the branch administrative officer grade in that year: that it would "allow the Union to increase its officer strength and enable it to become more effective in recruitment, organisation, service, and the retention of members:"<sup>26</sup> reflect the familiar concerns noted in Chapter 4. At the unofficial level, however, another reason for this reform was

the growing concern at national level of the power of "whole-time" branch secretaries,<sup>27</sup> who were allowed into the union's superannuation fund for officers, but anomalously categorised as lay members and hence eligible to stand for elected posts.

Whatever the reasons behind the reform its institution was a recipe for confusion, because of its failure to make clear the exact division of responsibilities between regional officers and branch administrative officers, Congress approving the badly-formulated proposition that "it is desirable that the new grade of officer should be able to take over responsibility for appropriate forms of representation."<sup>28</sup> This inconsistency reinforced the need to re-examine regional officer structure to take account of the growth of shop stewards and workplace bargaining and, as the introduction noted, led to the union following closely the advice of one of Donovan's authors, introducing the district officer grade and phasing out branch administrative officers.

In essence, the district officer proposals saw the new grade as establishing a greater presence on the ground and envisaged that they would be allocated to "informal districts" selected for their organisational and recruitment potential. District officers would be involved in two main kinds of situation: the "greenfield" area, where there may be no existing branches but valuable recruiting opportunities; and where there are already existing branches:



" the District officer will liaise closely with the existing membership and their voluntary branch secretaries and assist them with their recruitment activity. He will also be their first line of access to its services. In certain cases, when necessary, the District Officer may undertake some administrative duties; though it is important to note that he is not principally an administrator of branches. Although the District Officer will maintain close contact with his branches, one of his major objectives must be to encourage them to become as self-reliant as possible in the handling of their industrial problems."<sup>29</sup>

Once again, the division of responsibilities between regional and, this time, district officers was not made explicit and implementation of the proposals was left to the discretion of the regions. The result was not satisfactory. Four years later an Executive Council report to Congress on finances, district officers and services, commented:

" The practicalities of implementing the 1974 Congress decision were underestimated and the appointment of District Officers throughout the regions has developed in an uneven manner ... Some Regions have developed a geographical approach to appointments, others an industrial needs approach. There are wide variations in direct/indirect branch responsibilities of District Officers both within Regions, and Region to Region."<sup>30</sup>

The implementation of the district officer grade proposals, it has already been noted in previous chapters, varied significantly in the three study regions. In both the Birmingham and Liverpool regions every district officer was given direct branch secretary responsibilities, while the Northern region followed the spirit of the 1974 Congress decision more closely, with district officers only rarely involved with branch administration. The involvement of district officers in negotiations also varied widely both



within and between the study regions according to different general patterns. In the Birmingham region some of the district officers performed a first-line negotiating role in addition to their administrative function, but mainly they acted exclusively as secretaries of the region's large branches, with, in particular, former branch administrative officers appointed as district officers carrying on exactly the same as before. In contrast, the Northern region used district officers explicitly in negotiation and recruitment, blurring any distinction between regional and district officers and leading some of the latter to feel that they were "regional officers on the cheap" because of their lower pay scales. While, in the Liverpool region, district officer involvement in negotiation varied, depending on the number of branches allocated to them to administer, which in some cases was extensive.

Distinctions at this level of generality, however, although usefully illustrating different approaches, ignore the fact that the scope for district officer involvement in negotiations is dependent on the level of bargaining, which, in turn, varies in different industrial sectors. They also say nothing about the relationship between district officers, shop stewards and regional officers. Both these points reinforce the need for the sectoral study of the next section.

It is legitimate at this juncture, though again a

simplification, to note the potential for friction that existed, and was often apparent, between district and regional officers.<sup>31</sup> A commonly held view among regional officers in the Birmingham and Liverpool regions was that there was no scope for district officer involvement in negotiations since a competent shop steward can cope up to the stage where the specialist help of the regional officer is needed. A number of regional officers interviewed stated that they would not use district officers. On the other hand the prevalent attitude of district officers was that, through their closer contact, they knew the problems and grievances of their members and the facts behind a claim best and could therefore deal with it more effectively than any regional officer.

Some district officers interviewed admitted that they tried to minimise regional officer involvement in their area. It should not be thought, however, that there was a continual battle between district and regional officers. While these divergent attitudes were commonly held, the actions described represented the extremes, and, in the large majority of instances district and regional officers maintained good working relationships despite the potential for friction that existed as a result of the inadequate job specification for the new grade and their mutual doubts.

The difficulties of rationalising district officer activity were discussed at Congress again in 1980. Introducing the



Executive Council report relating to organisation, recruitment and district officers, the general secretary stressed "one of the most iimportant conclusions of the report, is to make sure that the imbalanced development between regions is put right. We have from 2 in one Region to 16 in another."<sup>32</sup> The report, however, apart from talking vaguely about budgetary controls, gave no indication of how this would be achieved. It also, interestingly, accepted the re-defined role that many regions had adopted for district officers, in coming to the conclusion that "it was generally felt that no gain would be achieved if branch administration was taken away from District Officers."<sup>33</sup>

The GMB's major review of its finances and administration, Decision 84, agreed substantial changes in officer structure. Its recommendations recognised the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the district officer scheme and the need for the union to develop a higher local identity in many parts of the country and a clearer industrial identity in certain sectors if it was to maintain and improve membership. Under its proposals "regions should progressively return branch administration to lay members, and away from District Officers and Branch Administrative Officers,"<sup>34</sup> with "a new single grade of first line Organiser eventually absorbing the District Officer, Regional Officer and District Delegate grades" being established.<sup>35</sup> It also proposed that Organisers should "reduce the proportion of time spent on National and Regional JIC's and equivalent, where possible,



replacing officers with lay representatives, and concentrating officer-time on membership recruitment, consolidation and direct services"<sup>34</sup> and that a new regional industrial officer grade be introduced, normally two per region and responsible for major groups of members by broad sector, to give a clearer management structure.

Implementation of Decision 84's proposals relating to officers was delayed, following objections from officers about lack of consultation, until late 1986 early 1987, beyond the period of fieldwork research, and, in any event, a mature assessment of these changes will not be possible for a number of years. It already appears, however, that a similar pattern of powerful full-time lay branch secretaries, able to stand for elected office, is emerging in regions with large branches as existed in the union before 1965.

There also appears to be a strong potential for friction between organisers and regional industrial officers, as organisers come to terms with the fact that two of their number, previously regarded as equals, are now officially their superior. There are further potential problems in that the management role of regional industrial officers is not clearly defined and, as yet, it appears that they are to be given no training in their new responsibilities. In less than twenty years, therefore, the GMB has virtually turned full circle, moving from taking administration away from secretaries in large branches to giving it back to them, from

recognising the need for a separate grade of officer to establishing a single grade. Despite all these changes and refinements two common factors have remained throughout: the power that regions have to interpret national decisions as they see fit; and the influence of officers in regional elections.

The influence of officers in regional elections does not, as the previous chapter showed, conform to a single pattern. Officer influence is a function of a number of different variables: the union's rules, officer structure, branch structure, factional activity, union communications, membership interest and official and unofficial membership contact, to name only the most important. Moreover, these variables are determined at a number of different levels, varying between and within both regions and branches, making any overall assessment problematic to say the least. Nevertheless two general comments are cautiously offered.

The first is that giving branch administration back to lay members may potentially increase lay involvement but it will not necessarily do so. In the Birmingham region, it appears that the impact of Decision 84 will be merely to change the composition of the "big ten," - its control of regional elections will remain - while officers in the Northern region have never relied on this avenue for exercising influence. The second is that of Decision 84's officer reforms it is not the allocation of officers, but the allocation of officer



time, that may have the biggest consequences for democratic decision-making. Fieldwork in the three study regions showed that national and regional JIC's and provincial council places were filled almost exclusively by officers in the Birmingham and Liverpool regions, with the Northern region having a slightly, but not significantly, higher lay involvement. By introducing or extending lay involvement to regional and national negotiating bodies Decision '84's proposals, if properly implemented (and that must be open to doubt on past performance) could, therefore, stimulate membership participation in bargaining issues. Such a demand for greater lay involvement in these bodies has certainly been expressed by a number of national and regional industrial conferences and it is this structure that will now be examined.

#### The reform of the industrial conference structure

The introduction and development of national and regional industrial conferences in the GMB since 1969 has given formal status to membership participation in decision-making on bargaining issues for the first time, though the relevance of this participation has been consistently criticised by certain parts of the membership. Pressure for reform, stemming from membership comparisons with the role the TGWU gave to its members on industrial matters, surfaced on the floor of Congress with a proposal being passed in 1968 to investigate "the possibility of a trade group structure with



vertical and horizontal integration."<sup>37</sup> The following year national conferences were established for a small number of industries, but they were only regarded as "sounding boards" and not recognised by rule, their operating provisions were unclear with it being largely left to national officers and regional secretaries to do as they saw fit. Cooper's lack of enthusiasm for any substantial change was emphasised in his speech to the 1969 Congress, when, in a style hardly reminiscent of the times, he argued that: "your national officers who negotiate centrally and your regional officers whom we have to negotiate specially on a regional basis have got to make up their own minds as what kind of wage application or conditions application to promote."<sup>38</sup> As has been noted, this attitude, perhaps best summed up as "leave it to the professionals" was a hallmark of his stewardship.

Basnett's election marked the beginning of the move away from Cooper's benefit-oriented, clientelist approach, towards establishing an industrial service union. He had to move cautiously in relation to industrial conferences, however, since a number of regional secretaries and national officers were still very much against giving them any real power<sup>39</sup> and during his election campaign he opposed a proposal at Congress from a branch in the London region that "the scope and authority of Industrial Conferences be enhanced and that more opportunities be given to the lay members to participate in the formulation of claims and terms of acceptance and agreements."<sup>40</sup>

In 1975, however, under Basnett's aegis, Congress accepted a Executive Council document, widening the scope and status of industrial conferences, stipulating eighteen areas where they were to be held annually and laying down guidelines for their operation, though not codifying these in the union's rules.<sup>41</sup> This reform was very different from the trade group approach, with its broad sectors, that characterises the TGWU and was raised in the 1969 debate.

Some national officers, less than enthusiastic about this new channel of participation, called conferences at extremely short notice, not allowing time for regional industrial conferences to be held beforehand. Similarly, some regional secretaries opposed to the proposals did not bother to call regional conferences if they could possibly avoid doing so. Moreover, the status of industrial conferences was still far from clear: although the document approved by Congress explicitly stated that industrial conferences were to act in an advisory capacity, the guidelines implied more:

" Delegates to National Industrial Conferences have authority to discuss and formulate together with the National Industrial Officer, the industrial and bargaining policy for the appropriate industry. At all times, National Industrial Conferences shall be subject to the authority of Congress and to the Executive of the Union."<sup>42</sup>

Despite these inadequacies, membership enthusiasm for this reform ensured that industrial conferences burgeoned.

Additional sub-group conferences were held in the building



materials and food and drink sectors, though not necessarily annually, and meetings, termed industrial conferences, but held for company level negotiations, sprang up for workers in companies such as Rediffusion, Pilkingtons, British Gypsum and GEC. There was, however, membership pressure for further reform. A number of motions were passed by Congress or referred to the Executive Council in 1977, 1978 and 1979 calling for change, and, following a top level review, in 1980 the Executive Council produced a consultative document on national and regional industrial conferences, which was finally adopted, with slight modifications, at the 1981 Congress.

Moving the consultative document for the Executive at the 1980 Congress, the secretary of the Midlands and East Coast region asserted "it should be recognised by everybody that the growth in industrial conferences at both national and regional level has led to a major increase in democracy within our organisation."<sup>43</sup> The 1981 reforms for the first time gave official status in rule to industrial conferences.<sup>44</sup> They also extended the list of areas covered to twenty-four and allowed for conferences to be called for smaller groups at the general secretary's discretion; made regional representation on national conferences more proportional to their relevant membership; strengthened the role of regional conferences; and introduced new procedural and organisational measures. The most important of these limited the number of resolutions submitted to national



conferences to a manageable number and specified that delegates should only be obliged to vote in block where an explicit regional council mandate obliged them to do so.<sup>45</sup> The 1981 reform, therefore, extended the GMB's industrial conference structure to make conferences mandatory in every industry where the union had more than 10,000 members and optional, at the general secretary's discretion, in smaller cases. A list of industrial conferences is given in Table 6.1.

Despite the much vaunted claim that this reform was a major increase in democracy and notwithstanding pressure from members, particularly in the Liverpool and London regions, attempts to make the decisions taken by national industrial conferences binding on union negotiators were successfully resisted: the new rule stating:

" National Industrial Conferences shall report to and be advisory to the Executive Council and the Union negotiators, and decisions of Conferences relating to all aspects of policy and negotiations within their industries shall be subject to Executive Council and Congress policy."<sup>46</sup>

There was, however, a recognition in the document that single JIC National Conferences "play a crucial role in in guiding the NIO and trade union side members" and their resolutions "need to have appropriate status," but, in its opinion, in most cases other unions' views have to be taken into account and conferences must be "subject ultimately" to "Executive Judgement, often expressed by the General Secretary and the NIO, on how to progress negotiations."<sup>47</sup>

Table 6.1

List of Industrial Conferences agreed by the 1981 Annual Congress.

Industrial Conferences

Food Manufacturing	Subject to General Secretary's discretion (Examples only).
Biscuits	
Cocoa, Chocolate & Confectionary	
Distilling	
Brewing	
Shipbuilding	Clay industries Quarrying Asbestos Atomic Energy Transport Thermal Insulation Timber & Furniture Paper & Packaging Nurses Ambulancemen
Engineering	
Water	
Electricity	
Rubber	
Construction	
Govt. Industrials	
Steel	
Loc. Auth. Manual	
Loc. Auth. Craftsmen	
Elec. Cable-Making	
NHS	
Distribution	
Gas	
Hotel & Catering	
Chemicals	
Glass Container	
Textiles & Clothing	
MATSA (biennial)	

SOURCE: GMWU, Report of Sixty-Sixth Congress, p800-801.

The 1981 reforms, therefore, although increasing channels of participation, retained ultimate officer authority. National officers are still largely free to pursue the negotiating tactics that they wish and retain discretion, so long as they have the broad support of the general secretary and the Executive Council, on whether or not to recall the national conference or regional conferences or ballot the membership

to ratify any final agreement. In a skilled national officer these options can form different parts of the official's "managerial" strategy. Of course, any sensible national officer will want to establish a good understanding and close working relationship with leading lay members of the national industrial conference, but other options exist. The obvious implication to be drawn from this is that the importance of national industrial conferences as decision-making bodies very much depends on the relationship they have with their national officer and will vary from industry to industry. In cases where they are at loggerheads, the ability of members to exert pressure on the general secretary and Executive Council is crucial, though very few national officers would get into such a confrontation without being sure that their back was covered.

Interviews with lay members confirmed that perceptions of the importance of the industrial conference structure varied significantly between industries and only occasionally between individuals in the same industry. Generally, these attitudes closely corresponded with the level of bargaining in these industries: members in single JIC industries regarding them as more important than members in industries covering a number of companies negotiating separately at either national or local level, such as chemicals, food manufacturing, hotel and catering and textiles. More systematic interviews over a wider industrial base, however, would be needed before any firm conclusions could be reached.



In shipbuilding a number of lay members were sceptical about the value of having an industrial conference since its resolutions do not get discussed by the CSEU. There was also lingering resentment about the 1984 pay claim, which highlights one of the managerial options open to officers. Against the activists' wishes, the 17 full-time officers told the 6 lay members on the 23 strong CSEU national negotiating committee that they wanted to meet on their own to formulate an agenda for discussion. They then met for sixteen hours with the employers and ACAS, returning to tell their lay members that they had signed an agreement, which was later unenthusiastically accepted in a membership ballot.

The option of directly balloting the membership on national agreements is, however, as a recent study notes, rarely used in the GMB.<sup>49</sup> Apart from Filkingtons and fibreboard packing, which are essentially national company agreements, ballots have been used regularly only in the electricity supply and water industries where structural conditions: a comprehensive national agreement, multi-union negotiating structure and dispersed membership, favour their use and it is logical for all unions to adopt the same method of referring agreements to the membership. In the water industry, however, this has been used more for tactical reasons and, when it has been thought advantageous, agreements have been referred back to re-called regional industrial conferences rather than holding a ballot. The normal practice is for national agreements to be referred back to national industrial conferences or, in

the case of major sectors such as local government, re-called regional industrial conferences, with the latter being used on occasion by the national officer as "divide and rule" tactics. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that single JIC national and regional industrial conferences are the GMB's main democratic channel of consultation and communication with the membership on negotiating issues and that decisions reached by these bodies carry great weight and cannot be lightly ignored by any national officer.

The scope for national industrial conferences which do not have a direct relationship with a particular negotiating body is necessarily different. While single JIC conferences tend to be exclusively concerned with annual wage claim negotiations, these conferences tend to discuss wider economic and employment related issues and have developed more of a "talking shop" role. This can provide a useful forum for exchanging information about differences between similar companies in wages, conditions and management strategies, but is obviously not as important as the near decision-making role on bargaining issues that single JIC industrial conferences enjoy. This is inevitable, however, given the vertical dispersion of decision making in these industries. The main significance of industrial conferences is that they have increased horizontal participation in those industries that bargain at national level. Where bargaining is decentralised, members have the opportunity to participate in decision making in other ways, making industrial



conferences of limited relevance.

A full survey of collective bargaining procedures in the different industries which fix pay through single employer agreements is well beyond the scope of this study. In the GMB's 1985 Congress report the Birmingham region lists 215 different company agreements the union has negotiated, the Liverpool region lists 123 and the Northern region 226. It is possible, however, to make two general and, perhaps, obvious comments. Firstly, membership participation in formulating initial demands is normally channelled through shop stewards, bringing into question, as the introduction noted, their accessibility and accountability. Only occasionally is it channelled through the branch, though this varies between regions depending on the branch structure operated. Second, although the practice of referring back both national and company agreements has increased dramatically over the last twenty years - the workplace survey published by the DE in 1983 finding that two-thirds of GMB manual stewards reported that the last wage settlement had been referred back<sup>49</sup> - the form that the reference back of company agreements takes varies widely and will depend on the relationship between the shop stewards, branch officers and the regional officer. It is this relationship which is now examined in the specific studies of the GMB's industrial organisation in local government and private manufacturing.



## Membership participation in the sectoral studies

The eclectic approach to studying trade unions, with its concentration on national, regional and local levels of government, requires a substantial research input to provide a comprehensive picture of democratic practices. As Chapter One outlined, this was a principal reason why research was located within the eclectic framework and focused on the most neglected area of study, the regional level. The study of membership participation in the two sectors is, therefore, more inchoate than if the workplace had been the primary focus.

Local government and private manufacturing are major and very different sectors where the GMB is organised. Local government has been one of the GMB's traditional strengths; it has more members in this than any other sector and the GMB has dominated negotiations on the National Joint Council for manual workers. The GMB has been less dominant in private manufacturing, a more amorphous category, where bargaining can take place at different levels, but it has substantial membership in a number of industries within this category such as engineering, food, chemicals and glass. There are, however, additional and compelling reasons for examining these two sectors other than the contrast in bargaining contexts and the membership coverage that they provide.

Manufacturing industry has been the benchmark for most

industrial relations research over the last twenty years, a great deal of which has focused on the growth, influence and organisation of shop stewards<sup>50</sup> in workplace bargaining. Analysing private manufacturing, therefore, enables the study both to be located in and to comment on parts of this substantial body of literature and focusing on local government makes it possible to assess, as the introduction noted, the validity of exporting these findings to the public sector. There is a further reason for this choice. Industrial organisation in local government has been termed the problem of organising a fragmented workforce.<sup>50</sup> However, with the growing fragmentation of Britain's traditional manufacturing base, the "decline of the big battalions"<sup>51</sup> as they have been called by John Edmonds, these problems are increasingly being encountered in the manufacturing sector and it may be that certain trade union organisational characteristics now common in local government may become increasingly applicable to manufacturing.

Edmonds has rather aptly summarised the familiar, but increasingly outdated, view of the strength of shop stewards' committees in manufacturing industry:

" Throughout much of manufacturing industry, trade union power has traditionally been based on these semi-autonomous local committees. To a great extent, the union members determine their own local policy, and the shop stewards' committee works out its own tactics.

" Full-time union officials are not exactly ignored, but neither are they closely involved. In times of dispute they may be wheeled in like a mobile battering-ram and aimed at intransigent employers. But for most of the



time the shop stewards' committee gets on with its own business, undirected and without outside help."<sup>52</sup>

This section assesses four themes particularly relevant to membership participation in decision-making on bargaining issues: the applicability of the traditional model summarised above; the representativeness and accessibility of shop stewards to the membership; the extent to which shop stewards participate in collective bargaining; and the role of the "key steward" in local government.<sup>53</sup> It does not examine the minutiae of pay claims or the detailed bargaining between the GMB and employers since its focus is on internal decision-making, but the bargaining context is not ignored and its relationship to internal decision-making processes is considered where appropriate.

Before examining the GMB's involvement in the two sectors in detail it is important to highlight the extent of shop steward organisation in private manufacturing and local government and the formal status of shop stewards in the GMB's rules. Table 6.2 shows the formal indicators of shop steward organisation in the two sectors, which, within the manufacturing sector, vary positively with size. Their comparison evinces "considerable similarities between the traditional strongholds of stewards and those in which shop stewards have only emerged more recently."<sup>54</sup> While it is interesting to note these broadly similar patterns of shop steward organisation, however, it is their scope of activity and their accountability to the membership that is of



fundamental concern in this study.

The accountability of shop stewards to their members is partly determined by rule, and partly by custom and practice at individual workplaces, which can vary widely and is dependent on many factors. The GMB's rules allow for shop stewards to be appointed or elected by members employed at a workplace subject to the approval of the branch committee or the regional secretary if more than one branch is involved.<sup>55</sup>

Table 6.2

Percentage of establishments where a shop steward is present.

	Private Manufacturing	Local Government
Manual		
Recognised senior steward	74.0	70.0
Full-time steward present	11.7	33.0
Regular steward meetings	36.8	50.0
Non-manual		
Recognised senior steward	61.4	73.0
Full-time steward present	2.3	17.0
Regular steward meetings	30.0	83.0

SOURCE: Bain ed. (1983) p69.

Appointments can be by any one of three methods: by a majority vote on a show of hands, or by ballot of the members concerned at the place of employment; by a majority vote on a show of hands at a branch meeting; or by common consent among the members concerned that the office shall be filled by a

member appointed by the regional secretary.<sup>54</sup> Shop stewards may also elect one of their number as convenor. The scope of their duties, however, is set nationally, being defined in the shop steward's handbook published by the union,<sup>57</sup> and their activities are formally controlled regionally:

" The Shop Stewards and their Convenor shall be under the jurisdiction of the Regional Committee to whom they shall be required to give an undertaking to observe the Rules of the Union, and at all times to act in conformity with the decisions, and policy laid down by the governing authorities of the Union.<sup>58</sup>

When the rule book provisions covering the sanctioning and the conduct of strikes and the control over strike committees, are added this gives a potential panoply of controls at regional and national level over bargaining participants and strike decisions. The de jure control of shop stewards, however, is rarely exercised, although the regional committee has the power to remove a shop steward who wilfully disobeys union decisions, most of the time they are allowed to get on with their own business free from interference from union officials or governing bodies.

### Private manufacturing

The fieldwork conducted in the private manufacturing sector is described and analysed first as it forms the backbone of the traditional model of trade union power. Twenty-six interviews were conducted comprising eight full-time officers, twelve shop stewards or convenors, and six lay members. They were supplemented by a large number of

informal discussions. Research focused on a large engineering company in the West Midlands; a large chemical company with plants in the Birmingham and Northern regions; and a company in the construction materials sector with plants in all three regions. It also focused on six small companies; two each in companies in engineering, chemicals and textiles. Two companies were examined in each region and the companies were characterised by having at most two GMB stewards. Rather than presenting lengthy descriptive case studies of each company, however, a more selective and analytical approach is adopted concentrating on the salient points.

The research in engineering produced no startling new revelations, but it provided useful corroborating evidence to earlier published research. The traditional model was very apparent in an examination of a large multi-plant engineering company in the West Midlands which had extensive and sophisticated shop steward organisation. In addition to a well-established shop steward and convenor structure at each plant, with a plant shop steward committee, convenors and senior stewards had formed a combine committee which met regularly and was an important source of decision-making on pay bargaining strategy. The committee comprised both GMB and AEU stewards, whose different occupational backgrounds meant that relationships at times were fraught; the fact that it met regularly owed a great deal to management positively supporting the body, providing facilities, including



transport where necessary and allowing time-off to hold meetings. A number of convenors and senior shop stewards at plant level were either <sup>to</sup> recognised as full-time stewards or spent very little time at their work occupation and were provided with facilities to carry out their work.

The initiative for these organisational innovations, most of which took place in the early to mid-1970s, appears to have come from the shop stewards and the membership, but it was evident from an interview with a senior manager that these structures were encouraged by the company. This was because of the advantages they perceived in identifying a small number of key people they could deal with when sensitive issues arose, who they were reasonably sure were representative of their members, so that decisions agreed with them would stick. In this sense the study was a confirming instance of the literature noting the importance of management sponsorship in the development of shop stewards organisation.<sup>59</sup>

The recession, as Chapter 3 noted, has had a particularly devastating effect on GMB membership in manufacturing in the West Midlands. While this has led to a decline in the size of the workforce in the company, however, it has not led to any significant change in the management's attitude to shop steward organisation. The combine committee and shop stewards committees at plant level do not have the power that they had in the tight labour market of the 1970s, when

members were more prepared to take industrial action to pursue their demands, but they are still regarded by management as having positive benefits. The demands raised by the combine committee and at shop stewards committees at plant level have become more muted in a climate of lower expectations and management attitudes have hardened, but there is no evidence to suggest that shop stewards felt the need to keep their heads below the parapet.

The relationship between workplace and union structure was found to be largely irrelevant in this particular case. A number of shop stewards were active in their respective branches, but these branches were general not workplace branches and did not discuss company issues. The study supported the view of a previous study, which found that the relationship between the workplace and the lowest level of union organisation was subordinate to the relationship between the workplace organisation and the full-time union officer.<sup>40</sup> It, however, also suggested that its contention that trade unions whose branches are organised on a general rather than a workplace basis show a tendency to act as if they are workplace branches<sup>41</sup> is ill-founded since this was not apparent either in this or any of the other case studies.

In all three large manufacturing companies the shop stewards interviewed tended to conform to the leader or populist ideal types that have been noted in micro-analytical workplace research.<sup>42</sup> There were variations in this pattern, stewards



switching from being leaders on one issue to populists on another, but the more important stewards along with the convenors all tended to be leaders. This was explicitly recognised by one regional officer who baldly said that stewards who were populists had no credibility with either him or with management and were excluded from negotiations. The three cases, therefore, tended to confirm the validity of research noting the important role played by convenors and a "quasi-elite" of experienced stewards in determining policy on issues in large manufacturing establishments.<sup>43</sup>

Substantial similarities were also evident in the pattern of membership involvement in the annual wage negotiations in the three large companies. The common practice was for plant meetings of the GMB's members to be held, but at these meetings it was the GMB convenors and quasi-elite members, along with the full-time officer, that acted as the crucial opinion formers in determining the union's initial bargaining position. This was then discussed with the full-time officers, convenors and quasi-elite members of the other unions before presenting a common claim to management. The membership thus while, in theory, having the opportunity to determine policy, in practice, deferred to the opinions of the full-time officer and the lay leadership. They did, however, have an opportunity to vote on any decision reached, normally by show of hands at a special section meeting on a plant basis, since in all three cases any final agreement was referred back to the membership for final ratification.



The formation of the combine committee in the West Midland engineering company in the <sup>£-</sup>1970s gave some indication of the opening up of the bargaining process to shop stewards during the Basnett era and the influence of management sponsorship in allowing stewards to participate directly in negotiations. Lay participation also increased but took a different form in the company involved with construction material manufacture; a major brick-making company which negotiates pay nationally and whose plants are as far apart as County Durham and East Sussex. The company only recognises two unions: the GMB and the TGWU: and up until the early 1970s the standard practice was for the national agreement to be negotiated by full-time officers with convenors dealing with local agreements. From the mid-1970s, however, there was pressure from convenors and senior stewards for greater involvement in national negotiations and a combine committee comprising representatives from all fourteen plants was formed, largely encouraged by the TGWU, to coordinate activities. The combine committee has been crucial to processing demands rising from the membership in the separate plants, but although it is important in formulating the bargaining stance of the companies workforce, the negotiation of the national agreement is still conducted primarily by full-time union officers. The combine committee's ability to participate directly in negotiations is limited to its electing one lay member to serve on the five person negotiating committee which, in 1985, comprised three TGWU full-time officials, one

GMB regional officer, and a GMB lay member elected with the support of the TGWU.

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There were, however, significant changes in direct lay participation in bargaining at the plant level during the 1970s. Where it was previously common for full-time officers to negotiate local agreements, this negotiating role is now undertaken by stewards. The traditional model of the semi-autonomous shop stewards' committee was evident; in two of the three plants examined stewards interviewed said that their regional official had only attended the workplace three times in three years to sign the local agreement negotiated by the convenors. Only in the plant in the Liverpool region, however, were members in a workplace branch; members at plants in the Birmingham and Northern regions had to rely on the calling of sectional meetings to discuss problems and issues relating to the plant and the company.

In the small engineering and chemical companies, the importance of workplace size, noted earlier as being a factor shaping the appointment and organisation of shop stewards, emerged very clearly. All of the shop stewards interviewed had to fit in union work in their spare time and had either a rudimentary shop stewards committee or no formal organisation. In the engineering company in Gateshead, which had nearly 100 workers, there was a joint shop stewards committee of four; the company in Dudley had only two stewards, one from the GMB and one from the AEU. In neither



case did their appear to be any problem of members having access to stewards. The chemical companies showed a similar pattern of organisation. In the smallest, a company in Widnes, there were two shop stewards for 60 GMB members; the other a slightly larger company in Northumberland had a joint shop stewards committee of five members, two of them GMB stewards.

The impression emerging from these interviews was that stewards in small manufacturing and chemical companies were not in a powerful position. A number of cases of victimisation were alleged and regional and district officers in all three regions indicated that this was more widespread and stated that they were increasingly having to perform roles and duties that in the 1970s had been performed by shop stewards. These officers had nearly always been involved with wage negotiations but were now being called in by stewards on other issues. In a hostile management climate very few stewards were prepared to act as leaders, most of them conformed to a populist role and seldom sought to initiate or dominate issues. Grievances generated by the membership tended to be quickly passed to the appropriate full-time officer; the steward acting more as a cipher than a first-line negotiator.

The fieldwork in the two companies in the clothing industry, based at locations in Shropshire and Runcorn, evinced similar developments to those noted in the other small manufacturing



establishments. Both textile companies operated piecework systems with rates of pay negotiated locally and in both GMB members were in a minority position compared to members of the Tailor and Garment Workers. Both had functioning shop stewards' committees, though no full-time shop stewards. Both had particularly confined workplaces, making GMB stewards easily accessible to members and able to regularly report back on discussions with management. The two GMB stewards in the Shropshire company also faced particular problems with management changes in 1980 resulting in a different, less co-operative, approach to trade unionism in the factory, making difficulties for meetings to be held in company time and docking pay for time spent at union meetings as well as changing working practices without consultation. These changes caused the GMB senior shop steward to use her regional officer more than her counterpart in Runcorn; the officer functioning as a "mobile battering-ram" and protecting the position of the steward.

The studies of small establishments in the private manufacturing sector, in contrast to the three large companies considered, indicated the increasing influence of the GMB's officers in decision making on a wide range of bargaining issues as a result of changes in the bargaining climate. The generalisability of these findings must be questioned, however, given the limited research base. Less contentiously, the case studies also highlighted the greater

reliance that stewards in small companies, often isolated and inexperienced, place on their full-time officers, emphasising the importance of regional differences in officer structure.

Regional variations in both branch and officer structure appear to have an impact on membership participation in small private manufacturing companies. In the Liverpool region its workplace based branch system and its officer structure meant that workplace problems were regularly discussed at branch meetings. Where the branch secretary was a district officer, as was the case with the chemical company in Widnes, he took responsibility for talking to management about any action that the branch decided to take. In cases where the branch secretary was a lay member it was found that officers were often requested to attend. In both situations the opinion of the full-time officer as to what is "on" and what is "not on" can be highly persuasive, but there seemed to be a strong element of membership control of decision-making in this structure.

Only two of the companies in the Birmingham and Northern regions had workplace branches. Although general branches can call a section meeting and request the presence of a full-time officer, in practice, only one branch held regular section meetings. It was more common for section meetings to be held when problems arose, but this was also often dispensed with and the officer called in immediately to negotiate. The importance of workplace branches or regular



section meetings is in the opportunity they provide for debate and discussion on current and future issues affecting the workplace. The evidence available suggests that this increases the scope for membership participation in bargaining issues.

While officer structure and branch structure are important variables in the equation of membership participation in decision-making on bargaining issues, industrial conferences in the manufacturing sector, surprisingly, were not generally regarded as being particularly relevant forums. Very few of the shop stewards or officers interviewed mentioned industrial conferences unprompted and, when asked specifically about their value, the majority view was that they were useful for "comparing notes" but not much else. This tends to confirm the view noted earlier that industrial conferences which are not concerned with national negotiations have evolved a "talking shop" role; they provide useful opportunities for membership activist contact but are peripheral to the decision-making process on bargaining issues.

Summarising briefly, it should be emphasised that private manufacturing has not the primary focus of research. The limited evidence, nevertheless, indicates that the traditional model of members determining policy and the shop stewards committee determining tactics is an oversimplification. The research in the large manufacturing



establishments suggested that convenors and some senior stewards acted as key opinion formers, while the influence of officers was found to be particularly extensive in the small manufacturing companies examined. Further, members accessibility to stewards varied as did the scope for direct steward participation in bargaining. Regional variations in branch structure also appeared to affect the propensity of the membership to participate in decisions on the union's initial bargaining stance, with workplace branches tending to facilitate involvement.

### Local government

The local government bargaining system has traditionally, since the 1950s, been heavily centralised. There are between 30 and 40 national negotiating bodies made up of a large number of employee and employer representatives.<sup>44</sup> While this is still the most important level for bargaining on pay and conditions there have been pressures for decentralisation<sup>45</sup> and a growing tendency for the local supplementation of nationally agreed terms and conditions.<sup>46</sup> The study of GMB decision-making on bargaining issues in local government, therefore, is concerned with both the scope for membership participation in local bargaining, through shop steward structures, and national bargaining, principally through the industrial conference structure. The former is examined first.

The GMB's strength in local government varies dramatically between regions. Chapter three noted that while the GMB was the dominant union in local <sup>£-</sup>government in the Liverpool and Northern regions it was comparatively weak in Birmingham. A good indication of this is the number of full-time officers allocated to service local government manual workers: the northern region have seven, Liverpool six, and the Birmingham region only one.<sup>47</sup>

Thirty two interviews were conducted comprising nine full-time officers, fifteen lay activists (convenors, shop stewards), and nine ordinary lay members. Research focused on three councils in each region. This meant that some detail was sacrificed, but it enabled examination of a cross-section of local authority types which some other studies have lacked.<sup>48</sup> This approach is justified since its aim is to comment on the dimensions of membership participation in decision-making, and not to give a comprehensive picture of shop steward organisation and inter-action. The authorities selected were the three major local authorities in each region, Birmingham, Liverpool and Newcastle; a metropolitan district and a non-metropolitan district in both the Birmingham and Liverpool regions and a non-metropolitan district and a county council in the Northern region.

The GMB has a substantial membership in each of the three major cities. As metropolitan authorities they have identical statutory functions and the bulk of the union's



membership is found in two areas, parks and gardens, and education, which covers caretakers, cleaners and school meals staff. This membership is served by an occupationally based branch structure: all three regions have separate branches for these two areas and a separate MATSA branch. While the Birmingham and Northern regions have one or two other branches in addition to this, however, the Liverpool region has fourteen other manual branches and five extra MATSA branches. Twelve of Liverpool city council's GMB branches are staffed by a district officer, including the big branches covering parks and gardens and education. In the other two regions all of the GMB's city council branches have lay branch secretaries.

Outside the three major cities the relationship between workplace and union also varies. The two other metropolitan districts, with less union members than the major cities though of similar population size to Liverpool and Newcastle, had only one branch for the whole GMB manual membership in one case and, in the Birmingham region, no associated local government branch. In this they conformed to the pattern of the smaller non-metropolitan districts which had a single branch in both the Liverpool and Northern region. The Birmingham region, with its relative weakness in local government, again provided the deviant case; its members being allocated to a nearby general branch. The Northern county council examined covered a large geographical area and its members were dispersed in a mixture of local government



and general branches. All these branches, with the exception of the non-met district in the Liverpool region, had lay branch secretaries.

Examination of branch structures relating to other local authorities showed the lack of local government branches in the Birmingham region and in the other regions confirmed that non-met districts tend to have only one general branch for the whole local authority membership. Met districts, having more functions are more occupationally diverse, and particularly in the Liverpool region had more branches than their Northern equivalents. Liverpool city council itself was an exception, however, and its plethora of branches appear to owe less to the attachment of members to workplace democracy and more to factional political activity and the desire to maximise seats and political influence through affiliating delegates to the district Labour party.

Shop steward organisation was found to vary with local authority size and political control, and also between similar authority types and sizes, reinforcing the findings of a more detailed study that "to refer to any single pattern of steward organisation in local government would ... be misleading."<sup>69</sup> The relevance of political control is directly analogous to the arguments stressing the importance of "management sponsorship" in the private sector.<sup>70</sup> The willingness of the Labour controlled county council in the Northern region to provide travel facilities for

geographically dispersed shop stewards was crucial to the development of an effective shop steward organisation within that council. Also, the change in political power which saw Labour take control of Liverpool council in 1983 and Birmingham in 1984 produced definite changes in management attitudes to granting facilities to shop stewards. While the size and occupational fragmentation of the workforce in the met districts presented specific organisational problems, positive support from the new council leadership, particularly in Liverpool, was central in allowing the unions to develop a unified steward organisation.

Joint union-management bodies, such as joint consultative committees, are the main channel through which unions can have access to the formal council decision-making process. All five met districts had separate joint consultative committees for its manual and its administrative, professional, technical and clerical grades, though the importance attached to these bodies varied enormously. These consultative arrangements are to be distinguished from negotiations between management and either stewards, acting individually or together, or full-time union officers acting individually or with officers from other unions, or from joint shop stewards committees' where they exist.

Newcastle city council, for example, has a sophisticated consultative procedure through the two separate JCC's and a powerful Corporate Joint Committee comprising all council



chief officers, senior councillors and all trade unions who have membership. It discusses council policy issues and its decisions carry great weight; however, as far as negotiations are concerned the joint shop stewards' committee is recognised as being the local joint negotiating committee. The joint shop stewards' committee in Liverpool is also recognised as the body with which the council negotiates, though, as will be shown below, the way that decisions are reached in Liverpool is very different to other local authorities. In the other authorities negotiations tend to be fragmented between occupational work groups and involve groups of stewards and officers, often on an ad hoc basis. Poor inter-union relations between full-time officers of the GMB and NUPE in the Birmingham region precluded serious co-operation on negotiating stances and joint action on issues, such as the privatisation of school cleaning in Birmingham and the other met district, to the extent that the acrimony became public and was reported in the press.<sup>71</sup>

It was found that political control was again an important factor in determining the status and membership of JCC's. In general, Labour controlled councils tended to accord a higher status to JCC's than Conservative controlled administrations, especially in Labour local authorities which did not have well-established joint shop stewards committees, while Conservative councils tended to keep but marginalise the importance of JCC's. One of the Liverpool district officers recommended to members, but it was rejected, that they



withdraw from the JCC in the Conservative controlled non-met district because it was just a "talking shop" and their voice was not being listened to properly.

The composition of the GMB element of JCC's was also found to vary significantly. One Conservative met district until recently refused to have lay members on its JCC, insisting that they all be full-time union officers, but this was very much an exception. In the major cities, the GMB's representatives on the manual workers' JCC were all shop stewards; outside these three areas, however, it was common for full-time officers to serve on these bodies along with key stewards. This was evident in the three non-met districts and also in the met district in the West Midlands, but interviews with regional and district officers revealed that it was widespread amongst smaller authorities and, generally, at the request of members and stewards who wanted the officer's expertise in discussions on local bonus schemes. This raises questions about the extent to which collective bargaining takes place at the local level and the degree to which decision-making on local bargaining issues is dispersed across the membership.

In all three major cities, the largest GMB branches were those in education and the largest occupational group within these branches were part-time women workers: school cleaners and dinner ladies. Their separate work locations gave them little opportunity to make contacts with fellow workers and,

in most cases, it was the branch that appointed or elected shop stewards to serve them. These stewards were not work group representatives in the traditional sense and, for the vast majority of these workers, the only likely contact they would have with their shop stewards was if they attended branch meetings. In contrast, the other major areas of GMB local government membership, parks and gardens and refuse collection were full-time occupations and almost exclusively held by men. Although their jobs were peripatetic, they were not so isolated as they generally started and finished the day in a depot, enabling closer contact with shop stewards who tended to emerge without branch instigation. It was from these stewards that the key stewards who sat on the joint shop steward committees and the JCC's tended to be drawn from. This made access through the workplace to the individuals involved in negotiations and in discussing council policy issues extremely difficult for a substantial part of the GMB's membership, the part-time women workers, particularly as issues affecting them but covering more than one workplace were invariably referred straight to JCC's.

The nature of local government manual work, therefore, often makes it difficult for members to have access to shop stewards and makes branch structure of crucial importance. Apart from Liverpool city council, regardless of local authority size, where there are local government branches, it is the branch secretary that is the person who is most likely to be the key steward and act as the mobile union



representative. In the Liverpool region this will be a district officer, but in the Northern region it is a lay person and, in the larger met districts, he or she is likely to be a recognised full-time shop steward. They are supported in the Northern region by the large number of district and regional officers given responsibility for looking after local government. They meet together roughly six times a year to discuss common issues and problems and organise the production of a regular municipal newsletter. Branches are encouraged to contribute to this which is sent out to shop stewards and branches every three months with enough copies for a third of the total membership. The Birmingham region provides very little support for its shop stewards apart from the intervention of a regional officer when problems arise.

Membership participation in decisions on local bargaining issues will depend on branch structure and on whether the issue affects one work group specifically or is a collective issue. If there is only one general local government branch for the authority, sectional meetings are often called to discuss issues affecting a single work group. Aside from the handling of individual grievances, which, in all cases studied, were dealt with through the shop steward structure, research suggested that membership participation in bargaining operated through the branch structure and was processed by the branch secretary for those authorities which did not have joint shop stewards' committees. In those that



did have JSSC's, the GMB's stewards on these bodies were still subject to any decisions taken by their respective branches, but the JSSC's <sup>£-</sup>developed an important independent status. The Liverpool council JSSC in particular clearly formulated policy and then sought to ratify it with their respective union branch memberships. The scope for local bargaining, however, is not great.

The evidence to suggest that local government manual shop stewards are regularly involved in collective bargaining was sparse. While a number of the authorities had local bonus schemes in operation they tended to cover only a few areas: refuse collection, street cleaning and, in two cases, gardeners. School cleaners were not included. Moreover, the extent to which serious bargaining took place in the formation of these schemes is open to question since they appeared to conform to very similar set patterns. Further, the major debate on JCC's during the research period concerned attempts to consolidate the bonus into basic rates. This strategy had been agreed amongst the unions at national level and, although it was discussed locally, shop stewards did not deviate from the detailed guidelines they were given on the proposals, while the response from membership in sympathetic councils was governed totally by financial considerations. In this context, the extent to which meaningful bargaining can be said to have taken place is also certainly questionable. The only evidence of GMB members in school cleaning participating in discussions about wages and

conditions concerned the specialised example of a local authority putting out this service to tender, with members meeting with stewards and <sup>4</sup>full-time officers to discuss wage rates and hours in compiling a tender bid. While this is an area which deserves further study, and will be increasingly important in local government with impending legislation on competitive tendering, the submitting of tender cannot in any way be called collective bargaining.

Neither, by definition, can GMB participation in JCC's be described as collective bargaining. They can be important forums, however, as the example of Newcastle's corporate joint committee showed. While the decisions they reach are merely minuted by the personnel committee and have no binding status in the council decision-making structure, they can lead either to the opening of formal negotiations or to a sympathetic council resolution taking on board their views. The views of the GMB, which represents 60 per cent of the manual workers in Newcastle, were significant in agreeing a policy for the transfer of county council staff following the abolition of Tyne and Wear metropolitan county council. The GMB were also closely involved in developing the council's strategy towards rate-capping, which was discussed extensively in the union's branches and in the corporate joint committee.<sup>72</sup>

The two areas where direct negotiations between management and joint shop stewards' committees that legitimately can be



described as bargaining did take place were over union membership agreements and job nomination rights. Other research has already pointed to the importance of political control in the negotiation and signing of an union membership agreement between the unions and Birmingham city council.<sup>73</sup> This is reinforced by this study since the only local authorities to have negotiated UMA's with their trade unions were all Labour controlled. The JSSC in Newcastle city council negotiated both a UMA and more recently a redeployment code of practice which has the effect of the unions being notified of all vacancies and being able to submit nominees for jobs. This has raised little comment as the unions have been careful not to move too directly into the managerial role. The practice of unions and, especially the GMB, being granted job nomination rights, however, has been widely and controversially used by the Labour administration in control of Liverpool city council since 1983.

### Decision-making in Liverpool

The GMB is the largest union representing Liverpool council workers with about 9,000 members of the city council's 31,000 employees. Its actions during the research period were virtually indistinguishable from those of the Militant-led city council. The GMB was the only trade union to support the actions of the council in issuing redundancy notices to its staff as a result of the city's financial crisis in 1985



when it delayed setting a rate for over eight months.<sup>74</sup>

The GMB's high profile in <sup>the</sup> the rate-making crises of 1984 and 1985 and in other issues were due to its power within the Liverpool Joint Shop Stewards' Committee. A key figure in this was Ian Lowes, the chair of the JSSC and the convenor of the GMB's number 5 branch, covering parks and gardens workers, and a declared supporter of Militant. The JSSC was formed in 1979 from the nucleus of a senior representatives committee of GMB stewards set up by one of the Liverpool regional officers and it expanded to cover the whole of the council's employees. A number of unions, however, such as NALGO, NUPE and the building workers section of the TGWU, left the JSSC during 1984/5 in disgust at the GMB's tactics.<sup>75</sup> Before the end of the council's confrontation with the Government the JSSC included only some elements from four of the council's 14 unions and was virtually defunct.

The rise and fall of the Liverpool JSSC as an important body owed everything to the attitude of the incoming Militant administration. It was their sponsorship that gave it power and it was the binding links between it and the council which ultimately destroyed it as an effective organisation for the joint representation of workers' interests. Its importance, however, was not, as might be expected, in the formulation of council policy towards unions and members. The GMB pursued its employment objectives through the district Labour party

and through close informal contact between convenors and senior shop stewards and the chair of personnel, Derek Hatton, much to the chagrin<sup>£</sup> of other unions.<sup>76</sup> Its importance was a tool for legitimating general calls for strike action in favour of the council which it was able to do successfully for much of its period of existence.

The channels through which the GMB membership in Liverpool city council pursues its employment objectives were shown in what was known locally as the "Big Asda Caper." It revolved around the granting of planning permission to build a hypermarket in the Speke Enterprise Zone in mid-1985.<sup>77</sup> Support for this #10 million, 5,000 square foot development was announced by Derek Hatton, the then Deputy leader and chair of Personnel, together with the Executive of the district Labour party, following Hatton's return from a holiday in Tangiers with an old friend and ex-GMB member, Tony Beyga, who had recently been appointed FR officer for the company which owned the proposed site. Headlining this the local paper, the Liverpool Echo, also disclosed that meetings between Hatton, Beyga, and GMB representatives, unbeknown to the Leader of the council, had been held over nine months and that the GMB had been given 100 per cent nomination rights for the new jobs. After a stormy meeting, the district party general committee overruled Hatton and the Executive and confirmed its opposition, along with that of other Labour parties up and down the country and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, to any retail



development in an area set up to encourage small manufacturing businesses. Most people thought that this was the end of the issue. At a further meeting, however, the GMB organised its block vote representation on the general committee to overturn the decision and agree to the construction of the hypermarket.

The "Big Asda" episode illustrated both the "sweetheart" relationship between the GMB and the Council and the importance of the district Labour party in the formulation of council policy. As the Labour party investigation into the Liverpool district Labour party revealed:

" In the rules the DLP is only responsible for the formulation of an 'electoral programme' which would in most DLPs be interpreted as the Manifesto and other broad strategic policy guidelines. In Liverpool the DLP appears to have become involved in a number of situations which should be the prerogative of the Labour Group. These include issues which would normally be decided by negotiation between the recognised trade unions in the council and council officers or council committees. Detailed involvement in industrial relations of this nature appears to the Investigation Team to be inappropriate, particularly since it also often gave the impression of by-passing normal trade unions and industrial relations procedures.<sup>78</sup>

The GMB's actions over the three Harthill gardeners who refused to take part in Liverpool's "day of action" in 1984 is another example of industrial relations procedures being conducted through the district Labour party. The three people were members of the GMB's Militant-dominated number 5 branch. It called for their dismissal and the council



readily agreed to accede to this demand. A high court injunction, however, declared this illegal and said that the gardeners should have a job as long as Harthill botanical gardens exist, whereupon the number 5 branch used its influence on the district Labour party to pass a resolution saying that Harthill nurseries are dangerous and calling for their demolition. "Militant have done what they intended to do: they have frightened other people" was one of the GMB's regional officers assessment of the branches actions.

The GMB influence in the district Labour party is extensive. Over twenty per cent of the 262 strong district Labour party in 1985 were direct affiliates from GMB branches and an unquantifiable number of delegates from constituencies were also GMB members. The number 5 branch alone appointed 28 delegates implying a minimum membership of over two thousand when its actual membership was 1195.<sup>79</sup> Its convenor, Ian Lowes, was an influential member of the district Labour party executive which, in effect, determined policy. Further the branch had recruited members of the council's "static security force" who attended meetings in uniform. They acted as stewards amidst widespread complaints of intimidation.<sup>80</sup>

The recruitment of the static security force was one area where the council gave the GMB's number 5 branch 100 per cent job nomination rights. It also had these rights in parks and recreation, with another Militant-controlled branch, number 80, having nomination rights in the education area. There is

ample documented and anecdotal evidence that these nomination rights were used to appoint people who were either members or politically sympathetic to Militant.<sup>81</sup> While the intention of this was to support the stand being taken by the city council it also had the effect of building up Militant support in GMB branches. Again the convenor of the number 5 branch and chair of the JSSC was the focal point in this process. Lowes had an office and secretarial and photocopying facilities and it was through him that application forms for jobs were organised. It cannot be realistically said, however, that the GMB negotiated for these rights; rather it appears that they were given gratis by the Militant council leadership.

The GMB's Militant stewards also had the power to sort out individual and minor collective grievances directly because of their close connections with certain leading councillors. They were able, therefore, to be highly influential among the membership appearing as union activists who "get things done." Major collective issues would have to be referred to the district Labour party, but, as has been shown, the GMB's voice was a powerful one within that body. This specialised access enabled the GMB's Militant stewards to build and maintain positive support amongst the membership. Attempts by the district officer, who acted as secretary for most of Liverpool council's GMB branches, to play the co-ordinating role of the key steward were strongly resisted by Militant stewards who carried out a systematic campaign to discredit



him with the membership.

The picture that emerges in Liverpool is that members had very little opportunity to participate in decision-making on bargaining issues if they were not members of Militant. Key decisions were taken within the Militant organisation<sup>22</sup> and then put into effect through the GMB's Militant-controlled branches and the district Labour party. The Joint Shop Stewards' Committee did not perform its normal function as a negotiating body, it was a political adjunct to the council, used to legitimate Militant calls for strike action and also as a basis for attempting to spread Militant policies to other local authorities by forming a national local authority shop stewards' combine. This body was called the National Local Authorities Co-ordinating Committee and its "organising secretary" was Ian Lowes. It was through this new structure that Militant hoped to increase its influence in national bargaining and there is some evidence of co-ordinated Militant action at a national level within the GMB's industrial conference structure.

#### Bargaining and the local government industrial conference structure

The complicated network of national bargaining bodies that exists in local government has already been briefly commented upon. Other research has looked in detail at pay bargaining in the public sector during the 1970s,<sup>22</sup> individual local



government wage round negotiations,<sup>83</sup> and the pressures that have been place on the bargaining structure.<sup>84</sup> Since this study is focused on GMB membership participation in decision-making, however, its treatment can be relatively brief as detailed analysis of negotiating bodies and negotiations is not required.

The caveat to this limitation of focus is the issue of lay representation on negotiating bodies. There is no lay GMB representation on the National Joint Council for manual workers. This is despite pressure from activists at industrial conferences, largely emanating from the Liverpool region but having other support. John Edmonds, when national officer for local government and secretary of the trade unions' side of the NJC, bluntly told delegates to Liverpool's 1985 regional industrial conference that they had no chance of getting lay representation through. There is, however, lay representation on the provincial councils and this varies from region to region. The Birmingham region has no lay representatives. In Liverpool there are more lay representatives than full-time GMB officers on the North West provincial council, principally because the senior GMB officer allows them to since he regards it as not being a very important body. The GMB has 10 of the 18 seats on the trade union side of the Northern provincial council. These are split equally between full-time officers and lay members, the latter being elected by branch ballot. Some lay candidates are vetted and not allowed to stand if thought

unsuitable. As with the regional council elections, the recommendations of officers are crucial to a candidates chances of success and, ~~not~~ surprisingly, there is a close personal identity between GMB members and officers on the Northern provincial council that is lacking in its Liverpool equivalent.

The procedure through which members can influence the GMB's national bargaining stance follows a predictable sequence. Branches meet before the annual national wage round negotiations and draw up wage claims which are submitted to the regional industrial conference. The regional industrial conference then formulates a claim, which may be in the form of one or more resolutions, and this is discussed at the national local government conference which produces one claim which is then discussed with the other local government manual unions prior to a single claim being submitted from the trade union side.

The detail required in formulating a national claim, however, and the fact that agreement has to be reached with other trade unions, means that the opportunity for branches to formulate policy directly is effectively limited to the possibility of expressing broad policy guidelines. Resolutions from regional conferences can be more detailed than this and the opinions of the region's full-time officers concerning what can and what cannot be achieved are, in most regions, closely listened to, particularly as some of



them are likely to be members of the GMB's NJC negotiating team. Similarly, the national officer at the national conference is a highly influential figure as he knows the likely bargaining positions of the other unions and is in the best position to form a judgement on what is likely to be accepted by the employers side. Evidence suggests that there is still a great deal of debate and disagreement about the correct course of action to be taken, but, in the period studied, interviews revealed widespread respect for the abilities of John Edmonds as a negotiator.

The main focus for opposition to the stance taken by Edmonds and the regional officers came from supporters of the National Local Authorities Co-ordinating Committee. Although vocal and organised it was not numerically strong. Lowes' claim that the committee's founding conference in March 1985 was attended by 250 delegates representing 500,000 workers at 60 councils<sup>23</sup> has the familiar ring of ultra-left groups exaggerating the importance of their "front" organisations. The recruitment form issued shortly after listed only 40 councils who were said to have participated and it is strongly suspected that many of these did not do so in an official capacity. Certainly that was the case with the Newcastle JSSC. The NLACC's core was essentially Liverpool JSSC and the London Bridge JSSC, another Militant organisation linking stewards in the inner London boroughs. Apart from that it only had isolated pockets of supporters. It was Militant GMB members in these two areas which provided



the only discernible opposition to the negotiating line taken by Edmonds.

Of the alternative methods of referring back national agreements that exist in the GMB, the practice in local government has been for the NJC agreement to be referred to re-called regional industrial conferences for ratification. Membership participation in this decision-making process is, therefore, indirect, through the election of its regional conference delegation. The normal size of these conferences is 40 which means that very few people are involved in taking the final decision, however, the delegation basis is through the branch structure which, in most circumstances, allows delegates to be held accountable to a clearly identifiable constituency. Whether this accountability is diligently exercised will depend on the level of activity of branches and their members, which as Chapter 4 showed, can vary enormously.

Liverpool, under Militant's influence, was the only GMB region to reject the 1984 and 1985 local government manual pay awards at its regional industrial conference - an action that was interpreted as "breast beating" by the region's full-time officers. It once again indicates the uniqueness of Liverpool and the power that this political faction has over local government decision making in the region.

## Conclusion

This chapter has completed<sup>£</sup> the research in the eclectic framework by examining the GMB's industrial organisation and membership participation in bargaining issues. It has had two distinct elements. First, it analysed the main developments in the GMB's "formal system" over the past twenty years; the rule book position, changes in officer structure and the industrial conference reforms. Second, it related these developments to two case studies of the GMB's "informal system" in the local government and private manufacturing sectors, which focused specifically on membership participation in bargaining issues.

The first part of the chapter reinforced the importance of union constitutional provisions, which had already emerged as a pervasive factor in preceeding chapters. It showed the constitutional authority that the union's rules vest in the general secretary and the Executive Council over the sanctioning and the conduct of strikes involving more than 300 members; it also emphasised the importance of the change in national leadership as a factor in transforming the clientelist, anti-strike image that characterised the union in the 1960s. It further confirmed the central importance of the GMB's regions within its structure and showed the effective limits on the power of the general secretary to implement change policies which relied for their success on regional implementation. This was particularly the case with

the union's officer structure which developed very differently in the regions to that originally intended, but also evident in the early <sup>to</sup> obstructionism of regional secretaries to industrial conferences. These findings corroborated the work of a major study of change in trade unions.<sup>94</sup>

The recent officer structure changes, by returning branch administration to lay members, potentially also affects participation in decision making on non-bargaining issues at a regional level. It appears, however, that while this may increase lay participation it will not necessarily do so. The indication from the Birmingham region is that it is merely changing the composition of the "big ten" which the previous chapter showed dominated the region's elections. The even clearer lesson of the Northern region is that officer influence in a region's elections does not require them to be branch secretaries and it will remain however they are structured or whatever their formal responsibilities.

The development of the GMB's industrial conference structure has provided a clear channel through which the membership may participate in decision-making on bargaining issues.

Industrial conferences are particularly important in industries which bargain at a national level, the single JIC industries, where conference decisions, although not binding on negotiators, are highly influential. They are inevitably of less relevance in industries where the normal means of



fixing pay is through single employer agreements. In these areas industrial conferences have developed more of a "talking shop" role, but they are still a useful forum, allowing members from different companies to meet and discuss industrial conditions and management strategies. These different roles for industrial conferences were apparent in the sector studies.

The second part of the chapter analysed the GMB's informal system, examining membership participation in the private manufacturing and local government sectors. It focused on four themes that have emerged from recent industrial relations research which has stressed the importance of the workplace in studies of union democracy. First, the applicability of what was termed the traditional model: expressed by Edmonds as being semi-autonomous from the union structure, with members determining policy and the shop stewards committee working out tactics. Second, the representativeness and accessibility of shop stewards to the membership. Third, the extent to which shop stewards participate in collective bargaining and fourth, the role of the key steward in local government.

Since the primary research focus within the eclectic approach has been the regional level the evidence underpinning the two sectoral studies is more inchoate than if the workplace had been the central research focus. This makes the drawing of firm conclusions difficult. Nevertheless, the distinction

drawn in the traditional model, between members determining policy and the shop stewards' committee determining tactics, appears to be an idealistic<sup>2</sup> distortion. The research conducted in large manufacturing establishments indicated that plant convenors and some senior shop stewards, the quasi-elite, acted as key opinion formers in determining policy, while the influence of full-time officers was found to be extensive in the smaller establishments studied, although the membership had the opportunity to participate more directly.

Branch and officer structure was found to have a significant impact on the level of membership participation in the smaller companies. Differences in the role of stewards between small and large manufacturing establishments were arguably explained by size effects. While small companies can approximate to a model of direct democracy large multi-plant companies cannot and require representative channels. It is suggested that in large establishments members recognise that they cannot solely determine policy or participate directly in decision-making, because other work groups, plants and trade unions are involved. Instead, they perceive their role in the bargaining process as electing a representative who is accountable to them and who will negotiate agreements on their behalf which will then be referred back to them for ratification or rejection. The adequacy of this as a democratic mechanism may be variable, however, as research indicated that there may be problems in



large companies with members having access to key decision-makers.

2-

Fieldwork focusing on trade union membership participation in the bargaining process inevitably touches on the growing debate about the role and influence of trade unions in a recession.<sup>87</sup> Although the debate is not of direct relevance to this study, it would be remiss not to point out the relevance of the fieldwork to two elements of the discussion: the power of shop stewards and the longevity of shop steward organisations. The latter can be disposed of quickly as the fieldwork confirmed the substantial survey evidence that there have been no significant changes.<sup>88</sup> The difficulties of assessing whether shop stewards are getting weaker has been pointed out, however, along with the limitations of case studies.<sup>89</sup> Noting this, the research evidence is simply offered without comment. Interviews with full-time officers in private manufacturing in the three regions revealed that, particularly in smaller manufacturing establishments, requests for their involvement were more frequent and often on issues which previously had been dealt with by shop stewards without full-time officer intervention. Partly related to this, a number of shop stewards also reported a hardening of management attitudes at their workplace, many of them reporting that management were not prepared to negotiate on issues that they had previously. Interviews with local government stewards and full-time officers, however, revealed a totally different picture; the major factor governing



management attitudes to stewards in this area was the political composition of the council.

2-

The importance attached by the membership to the union's industrial conference structure was very different in the two sectors. Industrial conferences in private manufacturing areas such as textiles and clothing, and even in engineering and chemicals tended to be regarded by activists as useful for "comparing notes" but little else. In contrast, the local government national conferences were dominated by detailed discussion of the annual wage claim.

The industrial conference structure has provided an important new dimension for membership participation in collective bargaining in local government. The influence of the national officer at these conferences, and full-time officers at the regional conferences, however, is extensive and stems from their membership of the negotiating team and their superior knowledge of structures and inter-union attitudes. There is no lay GMB representation on the National Joint Council, though there is, in some regions, on the less important Provincial Councils. Nevertheless, there is the potential for members to determine the GMB's initial bargaining position, as factional opposition from the Militant tendency proved. It was not successful because of its extreme stance and the widespread respect that existed for Edmonds' negotiating abilities, but it is not difficult to imagine that a different national officer might find it

problematic to get an industrial conference to agree to his or her wishes. The industrial conference membership, while not having access to detailed<sup>t</sup> information, are experienced, often full-time, lay activists with significant political skills. They insist on their right to make decisions and, despite the fact that they are not constitutionally binding on national officials, they obviously carry great weight.

At the local level the local government fieldwork found only a very limited scope for negotiations on bargaining issues,<sup>90</sup> confirming a recent study which found that "collective bargaining forms only a very small part of the steward's activities."<sup>91</sup> It also supported the study's view that shop stewards were not inevitably work group representatives. The research found that workers in parks and gardens tended to elect their stewards, who were based on depots and did act as work group representatives, but that the largest single group of GMB members, the part-time women employed as school cleaners and dinner ladies, were so occupationally isolated that shop stewards did not naturally emerge. Instead they were appointed by the branch and, because of the fragmentation of these work units, the only normal access these workers had to their shop stewards was if they attended branch meetings.

The branch emerged as a central focus for membership participation in decision-making on issues where bargaining did take place. Branch structure varied by region and local



authority size. The larger metropolitan district authorities studied all had separate branches for parks and gardens and for education workers. The non-metropolitan districts tended to have a single branch covering the authority, though in the Birmingham region, where local government membership is weak, there were very few local government branches. The Liverpool region tended to have more branches than the Northern region for equivalent sized local authorities, with Liverpool city council, exceptionally, having 16 manual branches.

The key stewards in local authorities tended to be the branch secretaries, which in the Liverpool region were district officers. In Liverpool council itself there was competition for the role of key steward between the district officer, who was secretary of 12 of the manual branches, and the Militant chairman of the city council's Joint Shop Stewards' Committee, with the latter playing the dominant role by virtue of his close association with the council's political leadership. By contrast, the research found good working relationships between shop stewards and full-time officers in Newcastle and other local authorities in the Northern region, which was found to provide the most support for its stewards.

The political composition of the council was found to be the crucial factor determining shop steward organisation, willingness to negotiate, and the status of joint consultative committees. Labour councils were found to be more likely to provide facilities for stewards and recognise



bodies of stewards' for negotiating purposes than Conservative authorities, and to attach greater importance to JCC's. Liverpool city council, again, was a completely aberrant case, with the GMB being dominated by Militant supporters and using its influence in the district Labour party, which was effectively given council policy-making powers, to achieve its employment objectives. It cannot realistically be said, however, that GMB members participated in bargaining issues. The GMB's key local government branches in Liverpool were effectively hijacked and used to promote Militant political ends. Decisions were taken within the Militant organisation and then implemented through utilising the GMB's branch structure.

The study, in completing the research within the eclectic framework, has uncovered substantial variations in membership participation in decision making on bargaining issues. These findings, however, have been based on relatively thin evidence; an inevitable by-product of the eclectic approach, which requires research into all levels of union government, and the decision to focus primarily on the regional level. Despite this caveat, however, the case studies clearly showed significant variations within sectors in three regions and between sectors in three regions, which indicate that there may be serious limits to the value of the conclusions reached by studies which focus on a single sector or workplace.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study has been about the organisation and government of the General Municipal and Boilermakers' from 1970 to 1985. Its focus is, as far as is known, unique in that it has concentrated primarily on government at the regional level. In examining the GMB's Birmingham, Liverpool and Northern regions it has sought to address the common conception that regional secretaries are barons of their area. It has also sought to analyse the wider issues of power and participation relevant to the ballot debate arising from the 1984 Trade Union Act, rather than focus explicitly on this policy issue which has already been well examined.<sup>1</sup>

The conclusions have been organised into separate sections. The first outlines the eclectic approach that has been adopted to union democracy and the research focus and framework applied in the study. The next four sections examine the regional focus: the vertical distribution of power in the GMB; patterns of regional organisation; the declining power of regional secretaries; and factors influencing participation at regional level. The sixth section analyses participation at the national level and the seventh participation in collective bargaining. Some brief final comments are then offered.

## The eclectic approach and union democracy research

The debate on the nature of union democracy has relied heavily on terms borrowed from political theory and the voluminous literature spawned in this century reflects the intellectual schism in political theory between parliamentary, or as it is sometimes called, representative democracy, and participatory democracy. This schism has focused research at opposite ends of the trade union governmental structure. At the national level, the parliamentary approach has been embodied in the literature examining factors attenuating oligarchy: closeness of elections, parties and factions, and constitutional checks and balances. On the other hand, the participatory view has been expressed in the more recent literature on the workplace, focusing on the "direct democracy" resulting from the growth of shop stewards and the decentralisation of bargaining; and on micro-analytical studies of membership involvement at branch meetings.

The eclectic approach recognises that attempts to define union democracy solely within one of these frameworks are inadequate, and argues that these approaches are complementary, not alternatives, and therefore capable of synthesis. It does this by adapting the framework developed by Undy et al.<sup>2</sup> This analyses union decision making, distinguishing between bargaining and non-bargaining issues, and examines the level and scope of decision making. Two



forms of dispersion of decision making are related to this: vertical dispersion; the degree to which decisions are decentralised from the national level; and horizontal dispersion; the degree to which members participate in decisions at a given level - national, regional, or local.

This framework is a useful descriptive device for examining the reality and variety of trade union democratic processes, but it offers no defining characteristic of democracy. It can be adapted relatively easily, however, to specify an ideal type of union democracy. The definition offered here prescribes that the lower the level of decision making and the wider the level of participation (and the more informed the participants) at any given level, the closer a union approaches an ideal democratic form. In taking this view, the eclectic approach thus subsumes previous approaches to union democracy within the framework of the vertical and horizontal dispersion of decision making by postulating them as intervening variables of potentially varying importance.

Previous research on trade union government by focusing on either the national or local level has ignored the significance of regional union structures. In making this the primary focus of study it is hoped that future research will add to knowledge in this neglected field by regional studies of other unions and comparative regional studies. As a secondary focus, however, the study also examined the importance of three intervening variables within the eclectic

approach which preliminary research suggested might significantly affect membership participation at the regional and other levels: constitutional checks and balances, factionalism, and branch structure.

### The vertical structure of government

The GMB's highly regionalised structure is unique amongst British trade unions. Only the autonomy given to the NUM's areas begins to approach the power that the GMB's regions wield within the union. While its great rival, the TGWU, appoints its officers at national level and has direct contact with its branches through the union's trade group structure, the GMB's officers are appointed by the regions which are the sole formal means of communication with the branch. Regional power is further consolidated by the GMB's rule book provisions dividing representation on the union's national bodies, the Executive Council and its sub-committees, and Congress, into regions. The union's rules also give the region almost absolute power over the branch and allow the regional committee to close or merge branches "for any reason it deems good and sufficient" and to act as the disciplinary body for the union.

In addition, the region has certain rule book powers on bargaining issues. The regional committee can sanction a strike where not more than 300 members are involved; a provision that is becoming more significant with the

increasing trends towards workplace fragmentation. Moreover, unless strikes are of national importance, the regional committee has jurisdiction over the strike committee and can appoint its members if more than one branch is involved in the dispute.

### Patterns of regional organisation

The vertical concentration of power at the regional level in the GMB has been widely recognised. What has not been appreciated or analysed, however, is the significant variations that exist within the regional horizontal level of government. Most academic and journalistic references to the GMB's regions have seemed to imply that they are almost identical monolithic institutions. This gives a false impression of regional government in the GMB. The case studies revealed substantial regional differences in branch structure, officer structure, recruitment strategies and performance, and political activities and organisation.

These differences make the GMB appear more like ten general unions rather than one. The Liverpool region has 86 per cent of its members in workplace or single-industry branches, the Lancashire region only 9 per cent. District officers have varied in number from two in one region to sixteen in another. Their role has also varied from being used almost exclusively as branch administrators in Liverpool and Birmingham, to having solely industrial responsibilities in



the Northern region. The latter region since 1978 has also developed an explicit recruitment strategy and organisation, and a political organisation, that was absent in the other two regions studied.

The principal reason for these differences is the autonomy traditionally afforded to the GMB's regions to run their own organisations and enshrined in the union's rules. They are also due to the discretion that regions have to interpret national policy - the variations in officer structure are testimony to this. This ability to maintain traditions and to frustrate or minimise the impact of national initiatives which affect them indicates the negative power of the GMB's regions and the constraints imposed on a reforming general secretary. It is also important to realise, however, that regions have the positive power to promote change in the absence of pressure from the national level. This occurred in Liverpool in the aftermath of the Pilkington's dispute. Although a national level inquiry prompted the break up of the large Pilkington's branch, there was no pressure for further reform; the region, however, chose to transform fundamentally its branch structure, splitting up large general branches and moving towards a workplace based structure.

### **The declining power of regional secretaries**

The power that the GMB's regions have within the union's

structure has commonly been associated with one person, the regional secretary. This may have been true before and immediately after the second world war; Clegg has convincingly shown that regional secretaries dominated their regions before the war and in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>3</sup> It has probably also been true more recently. In the 1960s, the Northern region's secretary, Cunningham, dominated not only union affairs but politics on Tyneside; Liverpool's regional secretary was notoriously unresponsive to membership views; and, in the early 1970s, the Birmingham regional secretary could buy 5,000 shares in a local radio station without informing the regional committee and without facing subsequent criticism. This has altered, however, as regional committees have become more active.

The image of the regional secretary as an all powerful baron does not bear much resemblance to the way that decisions are reached in the 1980s. The evidence is that decision making, far from being concentrated solely in the hands of the regional secretary, is, in fact, dispersed across the regional committee. This is the body that takes the key decisions in the region, not the regional council despite its de jure authority. As the region's administrator, the regional secretary's views can be highly influential, but, in the modern GMB, a regional secretary's power is the power to persuade not the power to dictate. This was well expressed by the Liverpool regional secretary, John Whelan, who said that his committee "prefer debate and discussion to being



told what to do." The Liverpool regional committee has been particularly active since the early 1970s. It was the motive force behind the changes in the region's branch structure; and this activity is sustained by the factional political activity in the region.

The regional secretary is, of course, still in a strong position. Since 1978, Burlison, the Northern regional secretary, has developed a high profile image for the union in the region; established a coherent recruitment strategy and organisation; increased political activity; and instituted quarterly conferences of branch representatives on a county basis to improve communications. It is recognised, however, that it is the Northern regional committee which takes the final decision on whether the regional secretary's proposals for change will be implemented.

Regional committees, nevertheless, depend on a level of activity and interest from its members if they are to be effective decision making bodies and a serious constraint on the power of regional secretaries. This is ensured in Liverpool by the factional activity that exists in the region and in the Northern region by its high level of union activism. Its absence in Birmingham has led to the regional committee allowing many of its functions to atrophy and to decisions being taken either by the regional secretary or delegated to officers. Where lay members have been involved,



however, decision making has become virtually a trial of strength between the regional secretary and chairman with the views of the latter prevailing.

### Factors influencing participation at regional level

The principal opportunity for members to participate in decision making at the regional level is through the elections to the regional council. This is because participation at the regional level is heavily conditioned by the union's rules. These ensure that the key posts in the region, the regional chairman, Executive Council delegates and regional committee are all indirectly elected.<sup>4</sup> They also allow only minimal information to be provided about candidates standing for the regional council - the body that elects these posts - and commit regions to using the increasingly indefensible block vote system in this election.

The restrictive participatory framework at regional level set by the union's rules can be either mitigated or reinforced by the two other issues that have developed as secondary research focuses. Branch structure is relevant to involvement in decision making in two ways. First, it affects the level of participation at branch meetings. The evidence confirmed earlier research findings that workplace branches are likely to be better attended than general branches; and smaller branches proportionately better attended than large branches. Second, in trade unions

operating the branch block vote system, the existence of large branches means that power can be concentrated in a few branches if they decide to <sup>act</sup> act in concert.

The low level of membership involvement in branch meetings has been recognised by the union nationally.<sup>2</sup> A large part of the reason for this, however, must be attributed to the union historically favouring the formation of large general branches. These were particularly encouraged when Cooper was general secretary, but they are also reinforced by the union's commission system which allows branch secretaries to retain 10 per cent of membership subscriptions in commission and a further 10 per cent to be paid to collecting stewards. This has encouraged ambitious branch secretaries to recruit new members regardless of their work occupation or whether they could be represented properly through their branch. Furthermore, the growth in check off has highlighted the potential for abuse of the commission system and there is clear evidence that in some branches, the secretary, acting either alone or with a few key people, effectively uses collecting stewards salaries as a form of patronage.

The study of regional elections in the Birmingham region graphically illustrated how branch structure, the block vote system, and patronage powers had led to the formation of an informal non-political grouping centred around the "big ten" branch secretaries who between them wielded nearly half the votes in the regional council and Congress delegation



elections and dominated the outcome. The influence of officers was extensive in these elections, as it was in the Northern region, but while the Northern regional officers relied on argument and persuasion of key local activists, the majority of the "big ten" in Birmingham were union officers and exercised influence directly. Although these are no longer to be branch secretaries under the union's Decision 84 reforms, there is already evidence that they are being replaced by lay members committed to the same tradition.

The workplace branch structure in the Liverpool region is a key reason for its elections being the most competitive in the GMB, but another is its high degree of factional activity. The evidence of the Liverpool study is that the existence of faction constrains the influence of the union's officers in the electoral process, and also encourages and informs participation. Factional activity tends to ensure a higher turnout and, where a union's rules forbid canvassing and the issuing of manifestoes, it provides a vital unofficial communication channel to the membership, preventing one group of people from establishing a knowledge monopoly. This occurred with the activity that saw the left-wing faction come to power following the Pilkington's dispute.

The most recent manifestation of factional competition, however, has been provided by the Militant tendency, based from its strength in local government in Liverpool, and has



been surrounded by accusations of intimidation and suspicious democratic procedures. Militant's antics have undoubtedly led to some GMB members deciding to refuse to participate in decision making on local government matters, particularly within Liverpool city council itself, but also at regional industrial conference level. They have, however, also stimulated members in other industrial sectors to organise against them and forced the faction which emerged following Pilkington's into heightened activity. The battle has not been pleasant, but it has promoted and informed participation. It is a paradox that an organisation committed to the overthrow of democracy can enhance democracy by the opposition it generates.

#### Participation at the national level

The GMB's rules governing the national political system give supreme authority both to Congress and to the Executive Council. In practice, however, it is the Executive that is the important body. The GMB's annual Congress is more docile than most. It is relatively small in size and the union's rules present formidable obstacles to branch resolutions being debated. Congress is, moreover, geared towards the articulation of regional interests. The scope for factional activity is, therefore, seriously limited by the GMB's constitution and rarely surfaces.

#### Membership involvement in decision making at national level

in the Cooper era was limited to this unsatisfactory participation at Congress and to the lay members elected from the regional councils to the union's general council, where they had a bare majority over the regional secretaries, and to the more important national executive, where they only had parity. Lay participation was extended by Basnett's 1975 reform proposals. The two-tier structure was abolished and replaced by a single Executive Council, where lay members outnumbered regional secretaries by two-to-one, and the role of industrial conferences was strengthened to increase membership participation in bargaining issues. The 1987 Congress has agreed to dilute the numerical influence of regional secretaries even further by introducing an additional reserved seat in each region for women.

The institution of consultative procedures on major organisational reform issues, beginning in the mid 1970s, opened up policy making in a limited manner to the wider membership and reflected the more open and consensual management style of Basnett compared to his predecessor. It also had the purpose, however, of enabling Basnett to utilise membership pressure for change to pass reforms through the Executive Council, which was important in the absence of any significant organised factional activity in the union to promote change.

The study essentially confirms Undy et al's findings that the GMB general secretary's job is primarily one of balancing a



small number of regional interests.<sup>4</sup> These were most evident in leading to Decision 84's proposal to reduce the number of regions being dropped. The regional interests of the Executive's lay members, however, are not necessarily identical to those of their regional secretary, and some lay Executive members are less committed to the concept of regionalism than others. The general secretary can through adroit brokerage, therefore, obtain support for change proposals which challenge certain regional interests. Government at national level in the GMB is a far more complex process than it seems on the surface; it centres around the construction of shifting coalitions of support. It is clear, however, that the influence of lay Executive Council members in decision making is greater than it was a decade ago.

#### Membership participation in collective bargaining

The occupational heterogeneity of the GMB's membership makes it impossible to offer general conclusions about the vertical and horizontal dispersion of decision making on bargaining issues. It is possible, however, to make three related general comments about the bargaining context. First, the union's rule importantly specify that the key decision to sanction a strike and to regulate their conduct is vested in the Executive Council where over 300 members are involved. Second, this concentration of power at the national level enabled Basnett to move the GMB away from its totally unsympathetic attitude to industrial action. This had caused



intense membership dissatisfaction in the 1960s and was a main cause of the Pilkington's unrest. Third, the new national officer appointments made under Basnett tended to share his more democratic attitudes and sought to encourage membership involvement in decision making. Unlike the majority of their predecessors, the new officers treated members more like participants and less like clients.

The introduction of industrial conferences has provided a significant extra channel for membership participation in bargaining issues in certain industries. The relevance of industrial conferences directly depends on the locus of bargaining. In industries and sectors which bargain nationally, such as local government, they have been an important forum for discussion and debate, and much of their time is devoted to consideration of the annual wage claim. Although the decisions reached by industrial conferences are not binding on union negotiators - a fact which has caused resentment amongst a number of activists - they do assume an influential status in single JIC industries and cannot be easily ignored. In industries where the primary means of fixing pay is through single employer agreements, however, such as textiles and clothing, the usefulness of industrial conferences is limited to comparing notes and discussions of general industrial problems.

The study of private manufacturing and local government confirmed the variability in importance attached to

industrial conferences. It also found wide differences between the two sectors in the scope for bargaining at a local level and in the role of shop stewards. The research in the local government sector strongly pointed to the importance of branch structure as the focal point for membership participation in bargaining issues and emphasised the importance of local authority political control in expanding what limited opportunities for local bargaining were available. More generally, the manufacturing studies highlighted a shift over time from the confident workplaces of the early 1970s, to shop stewards, particularly in small companies, increasingly using full-time officers when problems arose. This caution, however, was not so apparent in the larger manufacturing establishments, and almost totally absent in local government.

The case studies were based on relatively thin evidence, nevertheless, they clearly showed significant variations within sectors in three regions and between sectors in three regions. This indicates that there may be serious limits to the capacity of single sector or workplace studies to offer generalisations about membership behaviour and democratic practices at the workplace - a point which needs to be born in mind in future research in this field.

This study has been about the problem of research into union democracy and the democratic practices of a single union - the General Municipal and Boilermakers.' It would be remiss to finish without commenting on the implications of the conclusions for both the GMB and for union democracy research. As far as the GMB is concerned, two sorts of conclusions need to be made concerning its democratic practices. Firstly, it is necessary to make a judgement about the relative merits of the different regions' systems of government. Second it is apposite to offer some comments about democracy in the GMB as a whole.

On applying the eclectic model of union democracy, the research found that participation in decision making, and hence democracy, at the regional and local levels on non-bargaining issues was much less prevalent in Birmingham than the other two regions. Assessing the relative merits of the Liverpool and Northern regions, however, is more problematical since they offer very different governmental systems but both produce a relatively high level of participation. Nevertheless, it is argued that, out of the two, the Northern region offers a better model for other GMB regions to emulate.

Any comparison between the Northern and Liverpool regions needs to clearly periodise Liverpool pre and post Militant. Between the Pilkington's explosion of 1970 and the rise of



Militant in the region around 1977-78, the region benefitted from factional activity; the left faction which came to power shortly after the Pilkington's strike promoted democracy by transforming the region's branch structure into a primarily workplace based structure, stimulating local participation. Since around 1977, however, the brand of factionalism provided by the Militant tendency has damaged the union's image in Merseyside and, outside Liverpool City Council when Militant controlled, reduced the GMB's effectiveness as an organisation. Militant's intimidatory tactics have also prevented members from participating in union politics; though they have encouraged members to organise to oppose them, the overriding impression from the fieldwork was that their net effect has been almost certainly negative.

This finding indicates the need to re-appraise the significance of factionalism to the union democracy debate. The conclusion of this study is that factionalism provided by groups which accept democratic values can enhance democracy, but factionalism from groups, such as Militant, which reject democracy, can only corrode democratic structures in the long term. It is also concluded that the traditional counter-position of factionalism and oligarchy is misplaced. The example of the Northern region shows that factionalism and oligarchy are not of necessity opposite sides of the same coin.

The high level of active participation in governmental structures in the Northern region can be attributed to a number of factors, but certainly <sup>&</sup>not to factionalism, which is almost totally absent in the region. Participation levels have been enhanced, particularly by the splitting up of the regional council and Congress elections into geographical divisions; the absence of large branches since they were broken up in the 1960s; the regular branch chairs and secretaries meetings that the regional secretary and officers hold with staff; the close integration of shop stewards in union activities; the regular and successful production of the region's newsletter; the GMB's positive image and profile as the pivotal union in the North; and the general solidaristic traditions of Northern trade unionism.

In essence, the Northern region's activist governmental system offers the GMB a "middle way" between the virtual oligarchy of the Birmingham region and the factionalism of the Liverpool region. This "middle way" of activism is also arguably applicable to, and practicable in, other trade unions. Other studies within the field of union democracy could usefully examine the extent to which an activist model is applicable to other GMB regions and, indeed to other trade unions. This would, interestingly, involve assessing whether this model is a regional, that is a Northern, phenomenon; a task that was beyond the scope of this study.

It should not be thought, however, that the Northern region is being held up here as a perfect example of activist democracy. There are disadvantages and difficulties in the non-factionalised activist model. While the Northern region has been able to inform and involve members in elections, and in taking decisions, without having factions, through its communication systems, the introduction of some of these systems has had a double-edged effect. The institution of branch chairs and secretary conferences, for example, has improved communications and encouraged participation, but it has also led, in some instances, to the emergence of a "lay elite." This "lay elite" has privileged access to information, which encourages the tendency for ordinary members to rely on their judgement or leave decisions to them. It also produces the tendency for "lay elite" members to be inculcated with the values and opinions of the union's full-time officers; it was very evident, in some cases, that the views of these members were not only indistinguishable from, but scarcely disguised carbon-copies of, the views expressed by certain regional officials.

The Northern region's electoral system of dividing it regional council and Congress delegation elections into divisions, although an improvement on the other regions' systems, is still far from satisfactory. Members are likely to know a large number of the candidates standing in their division and are thus able to take informed decisions, but branches are eligible to vote for candidates



in divisions outside their own and this puts power in the hands of full-time officers and the "lay elite" who are the only people likely to know many of those standing and can use their influence to give crucial support to candidates they favour.

Another disadvantage with the Northern region's activist model is the persistence of its general branch structure. The official GMB opinion is that general branches reflect the union's historical traditions and are becoming increasingly relevant as a form of organisation as workplaces become fragmented and smaller. This is true on both counts, but it is still unsatisfactory. The research evidence available, although limited, clearly showed that, proportionately, general branches were less well-attended than workplace branches; it also indicated that workplace branches were perceived as being more relevant forums by members. Undoubtedly, changes in workplace size will increase the need for unions to re-assess their branch structures, but there is no a priori presumption in favour of general branches. Britain's other big general union, the TGWU, NUPE and others have maintained or established workplace branch systems, and these have played a part in making them more successful in attracting new members.

This discussion naturally leads on to more general comments about democracy in the GMB as a whole: how it has changed over the last fifteen years; how it compares with that of

other unions; and how it compares with the democratic ideal posited in the eclectic approach.

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The GMB has changed considerably since the Cooper era. In 1967 the union in its written evidence to the Donovan commission considered that:

"the structure of an individual trade union should;  
(a) provide a framework within which economic and industrial ends can be efficiently pursued;  
(b) be administratively efficient; (c) conform to membership conceptions of democracy."7

This probably accurately reflected the priority that Cooper attached to union democracy. Largely under Basnett's influence, the GMB has witnessed increased membership participation at both national and regional level. It has also seen increasing workplace participation in areas where bargaining has been decentralised, but participation at the branch level has remained a problem, as it has for other unions. In this sense the conclusion from applying the eclectic approach to union democracy is that the GMB can legitimately be described as having become more democratic over the last decade and a half.

While the GMB has become more democratic it is still regarded by many as being woefully oligarchic compared with a lot of other trade unions. It would not be right to introduce fresh information at this concluding stage of the thesis, which has been an intra-union rather than an inter-union study, but a few comments that have already been made need to be

re-iterated. On the general level, the GMB's lack of a workplace branch structure compared with the TGWU and NUPE, the total unfairness of its branch block vote system, its system of indirect elections for its powerful regional committees, and the inadequacies of its industrial conference system compared with the TGWU's trade group structure, all indicate that the GMB still lags behind a number of other unions in its democratic practices. There remain, therefore, opportunities to increase membership participation which can be grasped by imaginative leadership in the future.

Comparing the GMB with the eclectic model's democratic ideal type, the following suggestions for improving participation and promoting activism could usefully form an agenda for the GMB's leaders to discuss ways of enhancing democracy in their union. They are in no particular order and are not an exhaustive list. Firstly, re-structure the union's branches on a primarily workplace basis. Second, overhaul the commission system so that the incentives for forming large general branches are removed. Third, elect regional chairmen and regional committees directly by secret individual ballot; this could be done at the same time as Executive Council elections if desired. Fourth, expand the regional council into a regional conference of members, or, at a minimum, introduce electoral in the regional council elections and preclude inter-divisional voting.



Fifth, elect the Congress delegation either on a delegation basis with a number of branches clustered together, or, if on a regional basis, by electoral divisions with no inter-divisional voting. Sixth, radically expand Congress in size; its current delegation basis is half that of the TGWU and much smaller than virtually any other British trade union. Seventh, re-examine the need or desirability of Congress being structured to reflect regional viewpoints. Eighth, clarify the role of industrial conferences to give participants policy-making powers on bargaining issues which affect them solely. Lastly, examine the applicability of the Northern region's communication systems to other regions.

Analytically separate from the implications the research's conclusions have for policy makers in the GMB are the implications that the study has for researchers in the field of union democracy. This is the final area that needs comment. It involves assessing the implications arising from the regional focus of the study and analysing the advantages and disadvantages of using the eclectic approach as an organising framework/research tool.

The empirical research into the GMB's regions clearly showed the importance of regional governmental systems, and the extent of regional variations, within the union's overall governmental system, and related these to the union democracy debate. It also highlighted the importance of constitutional provisions in determining regional power. Since the study

did not set out to compare the GMB with other unions, however, the importance of regionalism in other trade union structures has not been examined. Based on the GMB's experience, the regional level must be regarded as being an important level of analysis in any study of trade union democracy. Future research could usefully examine the scope for important decisions being taken at regional level in other unions. It could also usefully compare regional government in a number of different unions and assess the role of union constitutional provisions in promoting regional decision making. Since regional trade union government is virtually an unexplored area, studies of this nature promise many fascinating new insights into trade union democratic practices, which should be of interest to students of union democracy and organisational behaviour, to the trade unions themselves, and to central government policy makers.

The eclectic model of union democracy developed for the research has proved to be a useful framework for analysing trade union government; the advantages of adopting the model significantly outweighing the minor disadvantages. It is difficult, however, to compare the eclectic approach with other models, since it subsumes them in its framework. Its strength as an analytical tool lies partly in that fact, combining, as it does, approaches which look at factionalism, elections, constitutional provisions, and local level participation; and partly in its focus on participation in decision making at all levels of union government - national,



regional and local. The comprehensive picture of union governmental activity required by the model does, nevertheless, present a practical difficulty in that it requires a formidable research input. Its adoption as a research tool, therefore, is more practicable for team projects rather than individual research. In this field it should be noted that there is a clear case for future group research updating Undy et al's work "Change in Trade Unions" to take account of the enormous changes that have occurred since 1979.

The principal advantage of adopting the eclectic model is that it avoids the sterile debate between parliamentary and participatory theories of union democracy, and the national or local research focuses that these have produced. By bringing together these disparate traditions it also provides the context for future research. A further advantage of the model is that it indicates the need for examining the relationship between different levels of government - national and regional, regional and local - in order to understand the dynamics of democracy. This is another area where future research could usefully contribute to knowledge.

Apart from the practical difficulty of the formidable research input required, the only significant disadvantage of adopting the eclectic approach is that, as it stands, it does not clearly specify all the variables affecting the level at which decisions are taken and the degree of membership



participation at each of these levels. Identifying factionalism as a variable, for instance, pushes into the background the large number of factors which studies of factionalism have shown determine its extent and variation. As long as these variables are recognised, however, there is no particular problem. There is nonetheless scope for considerable work in this area, particularly in the specification of contextual variables, which could lead to the extension and improvement of the eclectic approach.

How important is it to study democracy in trade unions? Democracy is a much used and abused term, and trade union democracy is no exception. Orwell noted that the defenders of any kind of regime claim that it is a democracy.<sup>8</sup> Shaw's hero, John Tanner, in "Man and Superman" was even more contemptuous, suggesting that "democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few."<sup>9</sup> Such cynicism cannot, however, deflect the belief that democratic processes are essential, and are as desirable in trade unions as they are in society as a whole. The study of these processes in trade unions is important not only because trade unions ought to be democratic, but because the study of union democracy can usefully highlight ways of enriching democracy in society as a whole. The application of the eclectic approach to British society and to central government decision making, however, is well beyond the scope of this study of the GMB.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

### CHAPTER 1: APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF DEMOCRACY IN TRADE UNIONS

- 1 Selected Essays, Baltimore, p149.
- 2 Undy and Martin (1984).
- 3 "Democracy in Trade Unions," Cmd 8778, HMSO.
- 4 Allen (1954) p15.
- 5 Hyman (1975) p83.
- 6 Allen (1954) p61.
- 7 Ibid, p64.
- 8 The need for democracy in trade unions has been argued by Hughes (1968).
- 9 This distinction has been drawn by Sartori (1962)
- 10 Schumpeter (1943) p242.
- 11 Ibid, p269.
- 12 Nicholson et al (1981) p7-8.
- 13 Williams (1976).
- 14 Pateman (1970) p105.
- 15 The two approaches are those by Hemingway (1978); and in Undy et al (1981) and Undy and Martin (1984).
- 16 S and B Webb (1902) p15.
- 17 Ibid, p36.
- 18 Ibid, p38.
- 19 Ibid, p40.
- 20 Michels (1959) p401.
- 21 See Lipset (1962) for a detailed analysis, where he acknowledges his "great intellectual debt" (p38) to Michels.

- 22 Gouldner in Lipset and Smelser, eds, (1961), p86 calls the Michelsian approach "even more morosely pessimistic than others."
- 23 Hands (1971) argues that Michels' analysis was based on rhetoric and snippets of information rather than rigorous research.
- 24 See Duverger (1954); Neumann (1956); and McKenzie (1966). The latter criticises Michels' determinism but, significantly, concludes that "this study has shown that there is ample evidence of the working of what Michels calls the 'technical' and 'psychological' factors which tend to ensure the emergence of, and the retention of power by a small group of leaders in each party," p587.
- 25 Clegg (1979) p200.
- 26 Goldstein (1952).
- 27 Magrath (1959).
- 28 Lipset et al (1956) p401.
- 29 Ibid, p403.
- 30 Michels (1959) p201.
- 31 Wooton's (1961) study of the Draughtsmen's union was the first attempt to re-define Lipset et al's unhelpfully restrictive view of opposition.
- 32 Martin (1968) p214.
- 33 Undy (1979) p31.
- 34 For example Bealey (1977); Seifert (1984).
- 35 Dickenson (1981) p198.
- 36 Undy and Martin (1984) p193.
- 37 The possibility of random voting is noted by Edelstein and Warner (1975) p68.
- 38 These variations are noted by Undy et al (1981) whose contribution will be examined later. Also relevant are the external changes in the level of bargaining that have taken place. These are shown by Brown (1981); Daniel and Millward (1983); Millward and Stevens (1986). The TGWU's reaction to bargaining changes has been analysed by Undy (1978).
- 39 Edelstein and Warner (1975).



- 40 Clegg (1979) p208.
- 41 Edelstein and Warner (1975) p65-66.
- 42 Martin's (1971) critical comments of Edelstein and Warner's preliminary Report can still be validly made against their final work. Their riposte (1971) is unconvincing. See also Ramaswamy's (1977) objections to their oversimple operationalisation.
- 43 Dahl (1971) p8.
- 44 Van de Vall (1970); Banks (1974).
- 45 Cook (1963) p219.
- 46 See for example Slichter's preface to Leiserson (1959) and Leiserson's views himself.
- 47 Ibid, p81.
- 48 Clegg (1976a) p101. The AEU's system is examined in detail by Undy and Martin (1984) 64-74.
- 49 Roberts (1956).
- 50 Flanders (1957) p51.
- 51 Fletcher (1970) p73.
- 52 This was suggested in Clegg (1976b).
- 53 See Batstone et al (1977) and the incorporation debate between Hyman (1979) and England (1981) for some of the arguments.
- 54 Undy's (1978) analysis of the devolution of bargaining in the TGWU shows how the union's rules concentrates power nationally enabling Jones to initiate reform. Undy et al (1981), p53-54, also imply that the GMB's constitutionally regionalised structure makes organisational reform more difficult. This will be examined in the following research.
- 55 Edmonds (1984).
- 56 Goldstein (1952).
- 57 Moran (1974) p166.
- 58 Cook (1963), p11, argues that "rule by the local union meeting is rule of an unrepresentative minority."
- 59 Spinrad (1960); Perline and Lorenz (1970).

- 60 This is noted by Seidman et al (1958) and  
Nicholson (1978).
- 61 See for example Tannenbaum and Kahn (1957); Child  
et al (1973).
- 62 Ramaswamy (1977) p470.
- 63 Lenin (1949) p75.
- 64 Marx (1962) p520.
- 65 Lenin (1949) p75.
- 66 Quoted in Medvedev (1977) p39.
- 67 Fairbrother (1984) p105.
- 68 Ibid, p107.
- 69 This term has been used by Olson (1965) p87; but, in  
this context is best associated with Herding (1972).
- 70 Hyman (1975) p76.
- 71 Ibid, p26.
- 72 Pateman (1970); see in particular Ch.4.
- 73 Stephenson (1957); Spinrad (1960); and Perline and  
Lorenz (1970) exemplify this approach.
- 74 Seidman et al (1958) p185.
- 75 Child et al (1973).
- 76 Nicholson et al (1981) p216.
- 77 This has been argued with respect to local government  
by Kessler (1986). Chapter 6 discusses this issue  
in more detail.
- 78 See Martin's (1968) "explanatory framework" of  
factors ensuring the survival of faction.
- 79 Nicholson et al (1981) p224.
- 80 Hyman (1971).
- 81 Kahn Freund (1979) p5.
- 82 The central views for and against incorporation have  
been prounded, respectively, by Hyman (1979) and  
England (1981). The latter has the more convincing  
argument.

- 83 Clegg (1976b).
- 84 Clegg (1979) p220.
- 85 Hemingway (1978) Chs. 1 and 2.
- 86 Ibid, p11.
- 87 Bachrach and Baratz (1963).
- 88 Nicholson et al (1981) p15.
- 89 Undy et al (1981) p20.
- 90 Undy and Martin (1984) p204.
- 91 See Hyman (1971) for his analysis of the importance of the democratic ethos.
- 92 Coleman (1956).
- 93 The notable exception to this is Undy and Martin (1984).
- 94 The last specific study was Clegg (1954); Clegg (1964) was essentially an historical analysis.

## CHAPTER 2: GENERAL UNION

- 1 Turner (1962) p14.
- 2 For example Turner's distinction, *ibid*, between "open" and "closed" unions and Hughes' (1967; 1968) "sectoral" and "sectoral-general" classification.
- 3 Donovan (1968) p1828.
- 4 Clegg (1979) p165.
- 5 Clegg (1954; 1964)
- 6 The history of the Boilermakers' has been written by Mortimer (1973).
- 7 Undy et al (1981) p130.
- 8 The term is taken from Undy et al (1981) p167.
- 9 Ibid, loc cit.
- 10 Clegg (1964) p96.



- 11 Clegg, *ibid*, p100-101, notes "the National Amalgamated Union of Labour strongly resented the superior attitudes adopted by the Workers' Union, while the Workers' Union were scornful of the old-fashioned methods of their ally."
- 12 *Ibid*, p99.
- 13 Clegg (1954) p1.
- 14 Clynes was a regional secretary, president of the NUGW from 1916-24, the NUGMW from 1924-37, and a Member of Parliament from 1906-31 and 1935-45.
- 15 The title of Chapter one of Clegg (1964).
- 16 *Ibid*, p21. Note that the term ditrict has been replaced with region in the quotation.
- 17 *Ibid*, p22.
- 18 Clegg (1954) p14.
- 19 Clegg (1964) p75.
- 20 *Ibid*, p70-71.
- 21 *Ibid*, p134.
- 22 *Ibid*, p135.
- 23 Clegg (1954) p72.
- 24 GMBATU (1984a) GMW Section Rule 17.1.
- 25 *Ibid*, GMW Section Rule 17.12.
- 26 *Ibid*, GMW Section Rule 17.17.
- 27 *Ibid*, GMW Section Rule 17.11.
- 28 Clegg (1954) p47.
- 29 This argument has ben particularly developed by Hyman (1975) p13.
- 30 Clegg (1964) p141.
- 31 *Ibid*, p142.
- 32 Clegg (1954) p6.
- 33 *Ibid*, p14.
- 34 Clegg (1964) p115.

- 35 The quotation comes from Clegg (1954) p315. Clegg fails, however, to note this volte face in Dukes' attitude to Cripps.
- 36 Ibid, p23.
- 37 Minkin (1980) provides a comprehensive account of how the Labour leadership used the block votes of Lawther, Deakin, Williamson and Carron to dominate policy making at the Labour party conference.
- 38 Clegg (1954) p254-255.
- 39 Price and Bain (1983) Table 1.
- 40 Lane and Roberts (1971) p232-233.
- 41 This has been suggested by Allen (1966) p115, but was a widely shared view, viz the quotation at footnote 45.
- 42 MacBeath (1979) p53.
- 43 Donovan (1968) p1780.
- 44 Milligan (1976) p101. He also wrongly asserts that the Workers' Union was one of the GMWU's constituent unions.
- 45 Jenkins (1970) p53.
- 46 Wilfred Beckerman in Beckerman (ed) (1972) p71.
- 47 GMWU, General Secretary's Report to the Fifty-Fourth Congress, 1969, p6.
- 48 Taylor (1980) p327.
- 49 Clegg (1964) p201.
- 50 Ibid, p202.
- 51 The union's attitudes in this respect are discussed in more detail in the chapter on membership participation in collective bargaining.
- 52 For a vicious piece of anti-GMWU vitriol see the "Solidarity" pamphlet "GMWU - A Scab Union" by Fore (1970). Note, this Solidarity grouping was an ultra-left faction not the right of centre group that is active in today's Labour party.
- 53 Undy et al (1981) p296.
- 54 GMWU, Report of the Fifty-Fourth Congress, 1969,

p43.

- 55 Lane and Roberts (1971) p190.
- 56 Ibid, p67.
- 57 Ibid, p70.
- 58 Ibid, p66.
- 59 Undy et al (1981) p298.
- 60 Hyman in Bain (ed) (1983) p43.

### CHAPTER 3: MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION AND THE NATIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM.

- 1 S. and B. Webb (1898) p15.
- 2 See for example Goldstein (1952); Allen (1954); and Roberts (1956).
- 3 Chairman's opening address to Congress 2.6.85.
- 4 Child et al (1973); Nicholson (1978); and Nicholson et al (1980) exemplify this type of approach.
- 5 Undy et al (1981); Bealey (1977).
- 6 Bealey (1977) p375.
- 7 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 3.1.
- 8 Ibid, Core Rule 3.2.
- 9 Ibid, Core Rule 4.2.
- 10 Ibid, Core Rule 4.5.
- 11 Ibid, Core Rule 5.1.
- 12 Ibid, Core Rule 5.7. This is doubly reinforced by rule 5.17 which also states that "Any matters not provided for in these Rules shall be decided by the Central Executive Council."
- 13 Ibid, Core Rule 5.15.
- 14 Ibid, Core Rule 5.6.



- 15 Ibid, Core Rule 13.A1.
- 16 Ibid, Core Rule 8.5.
- 17 Ibid, Core Rules 8.8 and 8.9.
- 18 Ibid, Core Rule 8.7.
- 19 Ibid, Core Rules 8.11, 8.12, 8.13 and 8.15.
- 20 Ibid, Core Rule 4.4.
- 21 Ibid, Core Rule 3.5.
- 22 The 1983 Congress was abbreviated due to the imminent general election and its resolutions were referred to the Executive Council.
- 23 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 4.1.
- 24 Minkin's (1980) study of the Labour party conference shows not only the central role of the block votes of certain general secretaries, including Williamson, but also the importance of the Conference Arrangements Committee in manipulating the conference agenda. The GMB's standing orders committee fulfills a similar function at its Congresses.
- 25 Bealey (1977) p378 notes that "it is not uncommon for the majority at Conference not to heed the advice of the Executive."
- 26 Clegg (1954) p62.
- 27 This is examined in more detail in chapter 5.
- 28 Bealey (1977) p379.
- 29 This is the position taken by Lipset et al (1956) p13 in their seminal study of the ITU.
- 30 Martin (1968) p207.
- 31 This follows the approach of Undy and Martin (1984) p193.
- 32 Clegg (1954) p61.
- 33 This is printed at the bottom of the final agenda which is discussed at Congress.
- 34 Militant is a Trotskyist entrust organisation operating within the Labour party. Its history and organisation is described by Crick (1984; 1986).

- 35 The operation of this body, the National Local Authorities' Co-ordinating Committee is discussed in Chapter six.
- 36 Guardian 25.6.87. £-
- 37 The General Worker, Spring 1985 issue, p6.
- 38 Martin (1968) p207.
- 39 In the Sunday Times 10.2.85.
- 40 Reported in the Guardian 23.6.87.
- 41 Clegg (1954) p13-14.
- 42 Ibid, p83-87.
- 43 Report of Sixty-Fourth Congress, 1979, p46.
- 44 Following Turner's (1962) typology.
- 45 Profile in the Financial Times 23.9.69.
- 46 The term Militant is the public name for the Revolutionary Socialist League, an entrust organisation on the Labour party. For further information on their organisation and methods see Crick (1984; 1986).
- 47 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 8.4.
- 48 The General Worker, Spring 1985 issue, p1.
- 49 MacBeath (1979) p49 wrongly asserts that Williamson was a regional secretary, leading him to conclude wrongly that Basnett's election was a significant break with past practice.
- 50 Reported in GMB Journal, Election Special, Summer 1985.
- 51 Undy and Martin (1984) Ch.2 give a full survey of the different balloting practices of the major unions in their internal elections.
- 52 Comment, obviously, cannot be made on other unions that operate branch lock vote systems such as the NUR and the NCU since their branch structure is very different from the GMB's and different circumstances may apply.
- 53 Financial Times 17.6.85.
- 54 Guardian 1.7.85.

- 55 The General Worker, Spring 1985 issue, p8.
- 56 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rules 3.1 and 5.1.
- 57 Bealey (1977).
- 58 For example Taylor (1980) p333 argues that the GMB's changes "have not drastically changed the internal power structure" while the labour editor of the Sunday Times, 10.2.85, find that the union is "still woefully oligarchic."
- 59 Undy et al (1981) p53-54.
- 60 The General Worker, Spring 1985 issue, p8.
- 61 Flanders (1974) p362.

#### CHAPTER 4: MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION AND BRANCH STRUCTURE

- 1 Since Donovan (1968) the two major surveys of changes in the bargaining structure have been Brown (1981) and Daniel and Millward (1983).
- 2 This has been suggested, perhaps eristically, by Clegg (1976).
- 3 This seems to be the underlying approach of the Fryer, Fairclough and Manson (1974) study of NUPE's organisation.
- 4 Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956) have argued that "the more homogenous the interests of the members of the union, the greater the chances for democracy" as economic conflict between members reduces the likelihood of anti-leadership alliances, p414. Martin (1968) modified this view pointing out that "occupational homogeneity and industrial heterogeneity provide a basis for both consensus and cleavage," p209. Clearly in the GMB's case its widespread membership presents formidable problems for successful factional organisation.
- 5 Martin (1968) rightly includes membership characteristics and beliefs as two other factors which may promote the survival of faction, arguing that memberships possessing high verbal and political skills can compete with officials to utilize the union political system, p211-212. The implications of this for



the overwhelmingly unskilled GMB membership are hopefully obvious.

- 6 See Price and Bain (1983).
- 7 Bain and Price provide a useful, though certainly not unbiased, introduction to this debate in Ch.1 of Bain (ed) (1983).
- 8 This view is largely attributed to Bain who has collaborated with different colleagues in research in this field. See Bain & Elsheikh (1976, 1979, 1981, 1982); Elsheikh & Bain (1980); Bain & Price (1980) and Price & Bain (1976, 1983).
- 9 This was argued over thirty years ago for the United States by Shister (1953) but has recently been forcibly argued for the UK by Undy et al (1981).
- 10 See p30 of Bain (ed) (1983).
- 11 This distinction is from Undy et al (1981).
- 12 Alan Fisher was a Midlands Divisional Officer for NUPE before becoming Assistant General Secretary and then General Secretary from 1968 to 1982.
- 13 DOE Employment Gazette, December 1984 and March/April 1986 issues.
- 14 Calculated from Price and Bain (1983) Table 1.
- 15 This has been recognised at national level as being a problem in the union, hence the move in Decision 84 to establish the Organiser grade. Most recently, John Edmonds has stated that "the future lies not with the negotiator but with the recruiter and the organiser." Reported in the Guardian 23.6.87.
- 16 They also mentioned that in certain areas, such as the NHS, the GMB was nowhere near competing with NUPE in terms of the officer support it could give members. "I don't why GMB members in the NHS stay with us" was one response.
- 17 DOE Employment Gazette, op cit.
- 18 Referred to by the district secretary in NUGMW Report of Fifty-Sixth Congress, held in 1971, p250.
- 19 Figures for the early 1970s are not available.

The new branch figures for 1976 -78 are taken from NUGMW Congress Reports for 1977 to 1979.

- 20 NALGO boundaries are far from coterminous with the Boundaries of the GMW's Northern region. For comparative purposes NALGO's North Eastern and Yorkshire and Humberside districts have been combined. Figures for the North Eastern district alone, one of NALGO's smallest, could have been used with very similar percentage changes in membership.
- 21 DOE Employment Gazette, op cit.
- 22 Undy et al (1981) p135.
- 23 Ibid, p135-136.
- 24 The industrial composition of a region's membership is both exogenous and endogenous; the industrial structure of the region is obviously exogenous, but union recruitment within industrial sectors is at its discretion and selective recruitment efforts can make an impact.
- 25 Undy et al (1981) p128-138.
- 26 Turner (1962) p14.
- 27 A number of people interviewed made this point. It is also noted in Clegg (1954) p37.
- 28 Clegg (1964) p75.
- 29 This analysis is for the England part of the Liverpool region only. In June 1984 this covered 78 per cent of the region's membership. The only significant part of the region not included is N. Ireland, which has a few large branches, most notably Harland & Wolfe. It has been excluded purely because of the logistical difficulties in conducting research there.
- 30 It is quite common for regions to have separate GMW and MATSA section branches in companies, though this by no means always the case - particularly in the Birmingham region. However, the point being made here is that workers in different sections of the production process of a company have different branches in the Liverpool region.
- 31 This argument was developed first by Bachrach and Baratz (1963).



- 32 This will be examined in the next chapter. It is mentioned at this point only to highlight the democratic aspect of Cunningham's reforms.
- 33 It should be remembered that the breakaway union wanted to join the TGWU as a separate trade group. Chapter 4 has analysed the impact of the Pilkingtons dispute on the GMWU. Lane and Roberts (1971) describe the strike in more detail.
- 34 GMBATU (1984a) GMWU Rule 17.2 and 17.5.
- 35 P.E.P. (1948) p26.
- 36 Halsey (1981) in a book based on his Reith lectures provides a formidable analysis of post-war change in Britain.
- 37 Flanders (1957) p55.
- 38 P.E.P. (1948) p28.
- 39 This study also casts doubts on Boraston et al's (1975) finding that unions whose branches were organised on a general rather than a workplace basis showed a tendency to act as if they were workplace branches, p160. Furthermore, it suggests that general branches which organise section meetings to discuss workplace problems have lower attendances at ordinary branch meetings.
- 40 Most notably in Goldthorpe et al's (1969) famous study of Luton workers.
- 41 McCarthy (1966) p39.
- 42 Clegg (1964) p205.
- 43 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 35.6 which, for some reason is duplicated in Core Rule 51.6. Core Rule 34.13 makes it clear that commission quarterage or funds can be paid to both check-off stewards and accredited shop stewards.
- 44 GMBATU (1984b) p18-19.
- 45 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 35.7.
- 46 The notable exception to this is Undy et al (1981).
- 47 This approach is exemplified by Roberts (1956).
- 48 For example, Fletcher (1970;1973).



- 49 Clegg (1976).
- 50 Hyman, in particular, has argued this in Bain (ed) (1983) p62 and in Hyman (1975) Ch.3.
- 51 GMBATU (1984c) p690.
- 52 Undy et al (1981).
- 53 GMBATU (1984c) p713.

## CHAPTER 5: REGIONAL POWER

- 1 The origin of the application of this term to the GMWU is unclear, but it is perhaps the most widely used description. See, for example, Clegg (1979) p211; Taylor (1980) p331; and Milligan (1976) p102.
- 2 This term is obviously not analytically separable from the term barons since barons were oligarchs, however, it is preferred by for example, Hyman (1975) p72.
- 3 Undy et al (1981) p53.
- 4 The only possible exception to this is Clegg (1954). But it does not look at the region in any great detail and its aim is descriptive rather than analytical.
- 5 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 44.1.
- 6 Ibid, Core Rule 44.3.
- 7 Ibid, Core Rule 44.4.
- 8 Ibid, Core Rule 44.2 and 44.8.
- 9 Ibid, Core Rule 44.7 and 44.9.
- 10 Ibid, Core Rule 46.2.
- 11 This is noted by Clegg (1954) p49-50. The term national body was used because of the changes since that time and to avoid confusion the term regions is used though they were known as districts before 1974. The Northern region's anomalous regional committee membership did not change until the 1983-85 regional council elections.

- 12 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 46.5.
- 13 Ibid, Core Rule 46.6
- 14 Ibid, Core Rule 13F2 and 13F4.
- 15 Ibid, Core Rule 13B2 and 13B4.
- 16 Ibid, Core Rule 31.1.
- 17 Undy et al (1981) p94.
- 18 This is discussed in Undy et al, ibid, but see also Undy (1978) for a more concise study.
- 19 GMBATU (1984a) GMW Section Rule 17.12.
- 20 Ibid, GMW Section Rule 17.11 and 17.17.
- 21 The distinction between officers and staff will be made clear in the next chapter and will look at officer structure in some detail, therefore it is not examined at this point.
- 22 Clegg (1964) p142.
- 23 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 5.1. However, this will change slightly with the women's reserved seats proposal agreed at the 1987 Congress.
- 24 Ibid, Core Rule 13E1.
- 25 Clegg (1954) p70-71 and (1964) p122-3, 140-1.
- 26 Undy and Martin (1984) p91.
- 27 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 13G1.
- 28 Undy and Martin (1984) p91.
- 29 Edelstein and Warner (1975).
- 30 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 44.4. The rule also states explicitly that "no branch shall have more than one representative" closing the loophole of other branches nominating people from a branch that already has nominated a person.
- 31 Ibid, Core Rule 3.3.
- 32 Undy and Martin (1984) p87.
- 33 The influence of the Group in the AUEW(E)'s elections is described in Undy (1979).

- 34 Lipset et al (1956) set the tone for the somewhat sterile debate on party and faction. In particular see Martin (1968) and Dickenson (1981). As Undy and Martin (1984) p193 recognise it is best seen as a continuum.
- 35 This term has been used by Sovietologists to describe the CPSU central committee pre-Gorbachev. Without pushing the analogy too far, there are striking similarities between the functioning and relationship of the central committee to the politburo and the relationship of the regional council to the regional committee
- 36 Militant's organisation is described by Crick (1984; 1986).
- 37 The Braddocks' domination of Liverpool Labour Party and local politics was so total it caused the New Statesman, 31.7.64, to compare Liverpool's boss politics with Chicago, calling it "Cook County, UK." A fascinating insight into how they ran local politics is found in their autobiography (1963).
- 38 The term, familiarly the notion that trade unions become absorbed into the institutions of capitalist society, has been used in the debate on corporatism and in discussing the incorporation or otherwise of shop stewards, Hyman (1979); England (1981). Its use, in suggesting the incorporation of certain branch secretaries into the region's bureaucratic structure, is therefore analogous to the latter.
- 39 Clegg (1954) p51.
- 40 Ibid, p52.
- 41 The two short quotations are from the Guardian 4.6.85; see also Daily Mirror 5.6.85.
- 42 The most interesting of the numerous stories were in the Dudley News 24.5.85; Express & Star 30.5.85; and Birmingham Post 11.6.85.
- 43 Labour Party NEC Minutes 27.11.85.
- 44 The NUM's electoral process are described in Edelstein & Warner (1975) and Undy and Martin (1984). Its factionalism is well-known: Joe Gormley's autobiography (1982) in particular and Allen (1981); Hall (1981) provide some interesting insights.



- 45 Undy and Martin (1984) p92.
- 46 This approach was exemplified in the studies by Allen (1954); Goldstein (1952); Roberts (1956); and Clegg (1954).

## CHAPTER 6: MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

- 1 The notable exception to this generalisation is, of course, Boraston et al (1975).
- 2 Clegg (1954) pp53, 68 and 70-77.
- 3 Ibid, p111.
- 4 Lane and Roberts (1971) p54. The parallels between this and modern single union deals can be gathered from reading the comments of Ilfords' chief personnel officer in his article in Personnel Management, December 1965.
- 5 Undy et al (1981) p134; Lane and Roberts (1971) p56.
- 6 Hyman (1974) p165 notes that this was "a significant trend of the late 1960s and early 1970s."
- 7 Brown (1981) Ch.2.
- 8 Undy (1978).
- 9 Fryer et al (1974).
- 10 This has been suggested by the eminent legal expert, Kahn-Freund (1979) p5.
- 11 Clegg (1979) p220.
- 12 Clegg et al (1961) p153. They also state they believe that there figure is too small, but suggest that the TUC's 1960 estimate of "at least 200,000 errs in the other direction."
- 13 McCarthy and Parker (1968) p94.
- 14 Brown (1981) p62.
- 15 This has been argued by Fryer et al (1974) and

for local government by Terry (1982) who also provides a useful overview in Bain ed (1983).

- 16 This has been pointed out by Kessler (1986) and the arguments developed here are very similar though not necessarily identical to his analysis which had a different focus.
- 17 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 5.1.
- 18 Ibid, Core Rule 31.1.
- 19 Ibid, Core Rule 31.2.
- 20 Ibid, Core Rule 31.3.
- 21 Ibid, Core Rules 31.5 and 31.6.
- 22 Clegg et al (1961) p5.
- 23 Brown and Lawson (1973) p432.
- 24 Ibid, p440.
- 25 This is from "Officer Class" an article by Robert Taylor in New Society, 29.3.73.
- 26 See "Special Report on Branch Administrative Officers" (1965) p5.
- 27 This point was made forcibly in an interview with Hugh Clegg and confirmed in subsequent interviews with older union members and officers.
- 28 Report of Fiftieth Congress, 1965, p433.
- 29 Report of Fifty-Ninth Congress, 1974, p587.
- 30 Report of Sixty-Third Congress, 1978, p612.
- 31 The friction between regional and district officers has been examined in another region in an unpublished MA dissertation by Friend, "A review of the District Officer grade in the Southern region of the GMWU," DIS 1980 102, Warwick University.
- 32 Report of Sixty-Fifth Congress, 1980, p717.
- 33 Ibid, p714.
- 34 GMBATU (1984c) p714.
- 35 Ibid, p707. The district delegate grade relates previous ASBSBSW officers.

- 36 Ibid, p708.
- 37 Report of Fifty-Third Congress, 1968, p318.
- 38 Report of Fifty-Fourth Congress, 1969, p45.  
The word "regional" has been used in this quotation instead of the term "district" actually used since Cooper was talking of officers who became regional officers following the 1974 officer changes.
- 39 This point is made by Undy et al (1981) p298.
- 40 Report of Fifty Eighth Congress, 1973, p317.
- 41 Undy et al (1981) p298 state somewhat misleadingly "in a report accepted by Conference in 1975 the structure of industrial conferences was formalized and improved." If they are using the word formalized in its normal context, included in rule, then their statement is erroneous.
- 42 Guideline 4, 1975 Guidelines on Industrial Conferences. Quoted in Report of Sixty-Fifth Congress, 1980, p755.
- 43 Ibid, p760.
- 44 GMBATU (1984a) GMW Section Rule 28.
- 45 See Report of Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1981, pp794-810.
- 46 GMBATU (1984a) GMW Section Rule 28.2.
- 47 Report of Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1981 p801-2.
- 48 Undy and Martin (1984) p145.
- 49 Daniel and Millward (1983) p129.
- 50 This is the title of Terry's (1982) article.
- 51 Edmonds (1984).
- 52 Ibid, p18.
- 53 This term will be used throughout the section in the same way as Terry (1982) p13.
- 54 Terry in Bain ed. (1983) p70.
- 55 GMBATU (1984a) Core Rule 51.1.



- 56 Ibid, Rule 51.2.
- 57 Ibid, Rule 51.5.
- 58 Ibid, Rule 51.3.
- 59 See in particular Brown et al (1978); Brown (1981) p79; and Terry (1983) p52.
- 60 Boraston et al (1975) p187.
- 61 Ibid, p160.
- 62 Batstone et al (1977) p34 also distinguish two further ideal types - nascent leaders and cowboys - however these are less common categories and research did not reach this level of sophistication since the case studies were not nearly so detailed as Batstone et al's study of a single plant.
- 63 Ibid, p53.
- 64 Walsh (1981) p45 quoting a discussion paper by Society of Chief Personnel Officers.
- 65 Ibid, p53.
- 66 Ingham (1985) in a survey of 235 local authorities found, p7, "not an inconsiderable level amount of supplementary local level bargaining."
- 67 This is a slight but justifiable simplification. The Birmingham region has one or two district officers who spend some time servicing local government members but they are not comparable to their counterparts in Liverpool and Northern in this respect.
- 68 Kessler (1986) rightly criticises Terry's (1982) sample of authorities which were all small semi-rural districts.
- 69 Kessler (1986) p427.
- 70 Footnote 59 refers.
- 71 See "Union row a threat to jobs," Birmingham Post 13.10.84. Poor GMB/NUPE relations have been a continuous feature. Again on school cleaning see Birmingham Post 20.4.82 where NUPE walked out of a mass meeting in protest at the GMB's stance.

- 72 A useful survey of Newcastle's financial problems is provided in the Local Government Chronicle, 16.8.85, p938.
- 73 Kessler (1986) p430. The West Midlands district referred to is Birmingham council.
- 74 Guardian 19.11.85.
- 75 See "Jobs for the Boys," Union World 30.3.85. Channel 4. Transcript available from author.
- 76 Ibid, see comments from NALGO and NUT representatives in particular.
- 77 Information has come mainly from interviews but see Liverpool echo, 24-31 1985. The New Statesman 22.2.85, p12-13 tells part of the story.
- 78 NEC (1986) p5.
- 79 Ibid, see Annexe J and Annexe C.
- 80 Ibid, p10.
- 81 Ibid, p32 for documented evidence. This was confirmed by interview.
- 82 Thomson and Beaumont (1978).
- 83 For example, Kessler and Winchester (1982) examine the 1981-82 wage round in some detail.
- 84 Walsh (1981).
- 85 See the Guardian 3.4.85.
- 86 The importance of leadership as a change agent is a major theme of Undy et al (1981) which also notes the limited power of the GMB general secretary compared with his TGWU rival, p53-54.
- 87 See in particular the papers given to the workshop on this subject reproduced in the British Journal of Industrial Relations, July 1986, for references to wider debates.
- 88 Batstone (1984); Millward and Stevens (1986).
- 89 Terry (1986) gives an excellent survey of the problem areas in this debate.

- 90 Ingham (1985) p6, argues that "there appears to be not an inconsiderable amount of supplementary local bargaining." but his figures somewhat belie this interpretation.
- 91 Kessler (1986) p438.

## CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 1 Undy and Martin (1984).
- 2 Undy et al (1981). See particularly p20.
- 3 Clegg (1954; 1964).
- 4 An interesting area for future study will be the changes imposed by the 1984 Trade Union Act forcing the GMB to elect its Executive Council, including the regional secretaries, by individual ballot. Significantly, it has already been decided to allow candidates to make personal statements for the first time. It is slightly disappointing, however, that the union did not grasp this opportunity and decide to elect its regional chairmen and committees by similar means.
- 5 Decision 84. See GMBATU (1984c) p713.
- 6 Undy et al (1981) p53-54.
- 7 Donovan (1968) p1777.
- 8 This is quoted at the beginning of Chapter One.
- 9 G.B. Shaw, "Man and Superman," Penguin edition, 1977, p252.



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